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LONG-HAIRED MAX; or THE BLACK LEAGUE OF THE COAST.

A CALIFORNIA MYSTERY.

BY CAPTAIN MARK WILTON,

AUTHOR OF "CACTUS JACK," "DON SOMBRERO," "LADY JAGUAR," "THE SCORPION BROTHERS," "CANYON DAVE," ETC., ETC.



LONG-HAIRED MAX SAW A HEADLESS BODY AND IN ITS HAND WAS THE SIGNAL LIGHT OF THE BLACK LEAGUE.

Long-Haired Max;

OR,

The Black League of the Coast.

A California Mystery.

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CHAPTER I.

A PLOT REVEALED.

ONE afternoon, in the year 1855, a medium-sized schooner was sailing northward along the Pacific coast, and at a point opposite the southern extremity of Lower California.

At the moment when we introduce her to the reader she was cutting the water at a goodly speed, but in no other way did she seem at all remarkable. An observer would have said she was stanch and swift, and, seeing her there, he would probably have added that she was en route to San Francisco with a cargo of supplies for the wielders of the pick, who had been rushing to the California gold-fields ever since the excitement of '49.

Her crew were all Americans, and, judging from their dialect, many of them were veritable Yankees; but not one would have drawn a second glance from any extraordinary reason.

The same could not be said, however, of one man, who stood by himself on the deck and looked off at the barren shore at the starboard. His gaze was absent, however, and it was plain that he really saw little of the scene before him, but was far away, mentally, even while his body was on board the schooner.

He was a strangely handsome fellow—this young man who seemed so out of place among the rude sailors who growled, quarreled, and drank day and day, as though these matters made up their highest ambition in life.

This other man was no sailor, however, for his hands were white and soft as those of a woman, and his garments those of a Mexican of the upper class.

His jacket-like coat and knee-breeches were of black velvet, ornamented and trimmed profusely, and around his sombrero were what seemed to be thick silver cords; all which show of magnificence, coupled with the fact that he wore his hair so long that it touched his shoulders, would go to make him a mere dandy in the East.

Yet, he was but one out of many in the West, and those who thought him insignificant had but to look at his face to see their mistake.

It was, emphatically, a powerful face. With regular features, a fine, dark, though not bronzed, complexion and remarkable, velvet-like eyes, he was a handsome man; but all this was lost to sight when his resolute look was noticed.

He was a man whom no danger could terrify, and who would follow a pursuit, an object, to the end, be that ending what it might.

As has been said, his hair was long. It fell down over his neck in waves, and was as black as jet, as was his heavy mustache.

In conclusion, he had the features and speech of an American, but from his dress, and because of a resemblance they fancied they saw in his dark complexion and dashing ways, his present companions had never suspected that he was one of their own countrymen, and he who had given the name of Max Proctor became known among them both as *Spanish Max* and *Long-Haired Max*.

Standing as thus described, the man was finally interrupted by the approach of one of the crew.

"It's an interestin' bit av coast we hev over yonder," said the latter, with a broad Celtic dialect.

Max aroused from his reverie.

"Very," he replied, quietly. "All that is needed are grass, trees and flowers and it would be a paradise. The sand and rocks are useful in their way, but a bit of green here and there would relieve the monotony."

The irony was lost on the sailor.

"I'm thinkin' yez w'u'd be better off if yez war dhere this blissid minute," he said, soberly.

The other man looked at him keenly.

"Better off? What do you mean?"

The Irishman looked carefully before he answered, but no one seemed observing them.

"It's meself will tell yez what I mane if yez swear not to give me away. Wan false move w'u'd place us both in a mighty bad fix."

"Possible? Well, I promise, so heave ahead with your yarn and don't be bashful."

"Yez look ter me loike a foighting man, an' whin I tell, yez may take a notion to draw yer w'apons an' sail in fur a foight."

"Which you think would be foolish?"

"Yes, sor, fur it w'u'd sind us both ter Davy Jones's locker, an' meself ain't ready to go yet."

"Well, I never fight unless somebody treads on my heels. I'm no disturber. I'll promise to

go light and fight only in self-defense. Will that do, Mr.—I don't know your name."

"Tim Foley is me name, sor, an' I'm not dhe worst mon aboard dhis craft. Well, yez see thib schooner is not dhe most honestest craft afloat, an' yez are in danger here. Phy do yez suppose ye was tuk as a passenger at Callao? Ye must remimber dhey didn't want yez aboard."

"True; I had to see them handsomely in a financial way before they would take me."

"Yis. Will, when dhey tuk yez, dhey had no idea av landing you at San Francisco, as dhey promised."

"What was their idea?" demanded Long-Haired Max, growing suddenly interested.

"To throw yez overboard!"

"Zounds! Is that a fact?"

"It's true as pr'aching, sor. Ye see dhis craft is not so honest as she moight be, an' ef dhey took yez to Frisco, ye w'u'd know too much. That's why dhey refused ye at first. Thin you offered dhe goold fr'aly, an' dhe captain made up his moind to take yez, an' thin to chuck yez overboard whin dhe proper toime came."

Long-Haired Max looked at his companion sharply. He saw a bronzed, irregular face, on which Tim Foley's nationality was plainly written, but he believed he also saw honesty and veracity in the small gray eyes and huge mouth. It was not a handsome face, but it was prepossessing.

"Do you know this to be a fact?" Max demanded.

"I overheard dhe cap'n an' mate say as much, at iny rate."

"No doubt you are right. I have never liked either one, and that Yankee captain strikes me as being a cut-throat, now you mention it. Well, and when do they propose to feed me to the fishes?"

"This blissid noight, sor. Whin dhe proper toime comes, you are to be called on deck to see a wreck dhey will say dhey discovered, an' thin dhey will bate you sinseless and throw yez overboard."

"A charming plan, by Judas; but, look here, my man—how does it happen you go back on your shipmates?"

"Faith, an' I haven't been wid dhem iny longer than ye hev. I was wricked from dhe Petrel's Wing, two months ago, an' was a-lying in Callao fur a chance whin along came Cap'n Peters. He said dheir trade was supplies fur dhe miners av California, an' dhat dhey had touched at Callao fur wather, an' I shipped loike a lamb, but, bedad, it's meself is now among wolves."

"You say they have a secret business. What is it?"

"Sure, an' I don't know meself, fur dhey have kept me in dhe dark, because I am a new man, but dhe crew have drapped a careless worrud, now an' thin, an' I know dhey are not honest."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"Bedad, an' I'm going to desert. Dhis blissid noight I shall tie a loife-preserver about me waist an' make fur dhe shore. Dhis fact dhat dhey think it toime to putt yez out av dhe way, makes it clear to me own moind dhat it is toime fur me to l'ave such company."

Long-Haired Max had not ceased to study his companion closely. Every look and word was weighed and considered, and nothing occurred to disturb his first impression.

Foley was telling the truth, and, beyond a doubt, they had both fallen among thieves unknowingly.

With his suspicions fairly aroused, Max saw many things to confirm the idea, and the natural inference was that the schooner was a pirate craft. Such being the case, what was his proper course? Foley intended to take to the water, and, beyond a doubt, it would be comparatively easy to reach the coast.

To remain was to pit himself against a dozen men.

"Tim," he finally said, "suppose I go with you when you desert?"

The Irishman's face brightened.

"Bedad!" he exclaimed, "it w'u'd suit me will. I niver was in dthese parts before, and it's meself loikes a shipmate."

"That settles it then, for though I seldom run from common danger, I had just as soon land at Nuevo Madrid as to go on to 'Frisco."

"Nuevo Madrid. Phat is dhat?"

"A small town on the coast, above the line between Northern and Lower California. It is one of the old Mexican towns, and the name has survived the transfer of the land from its former owners to the United States, but I understood that they intend to rename it."

"Can we land dhere?"

"I judge we shall be about ten miles below the town at dusk, but we can foot the intervening space easily. Will you look out for the life-preservers?"

"I will dhat, an' do yez kape your eyes open. Whist! here comes dhe cap'n!"

Tim slid away, and the schooner's skipper approached his passenger. He was a man of middle age, with a tall, lank, homely figure, flaxen-colored hair, a sparse beard, light-blue eyes, and ears and nose of formidable size.

This man was Jabez Peters, a production of the extreme East of the United States, but a man whose roving nature had taken him over half of the world. As a seaman he was certainly no novice, as Max had already seen, but what Tim had told placed him in a bad light as a man.

Now, approaching his passenger, Captain Peters smiled in an oily, childlike way, which was echoed by his soft voice.

"How de dew, Sinner Max?" he said.

It was a part of his plot to treat his distinguished companion with extreme politeness, but in grasping at the Spanish word *senor*, he invariably pronounced it "sinner."

"I'm in tolerable health, captain," the cavalier replied, as frankly as though he was addressing an angel. "We are humming along pretty lively."

"The Water Witch is no slouch," Peters declared. "When she gets the brine under her foot she uses it for all it is wuth."

"You will make 'Frisco on time, of course?"

"Ya-as, ef no accident happens, an' Jabez Peters ain't the man fur sich nonsense."

"Do you intend to touch anywhere on the coast short of 'Frisco?"

"No. What made yeou think we did?"

The captain's blue eyes were fixed suspiciously on his passenger.

"I? Oh, I didn't say so, nor think so. It was a random remark. Yet, I should think Nueva Madrid and Monterey would furnish some trade."

"I leave them tew one-hoss traders; I dew a fust-class business," Peters said, with an air of contempt intended for the smaller towns.

"A man in your position can afford to do so. Yet, I dare say, you have had some hard struggles while climbing so far up the ladder as where you now stand."

If Long-Haired Max hoped by the suggestion and the compliment to gain the confidence of his companion, he was doomed to disappointment, for Peters did not volunteer any information. He remained as reserved and cautious as he had been all through the voyage.

"A crafty, unscrupulous man," thought Max, when once more alone. "Beyond a doubt, Tim is right, and he not only has designs on my life but is engaged in some unlawful work. What can that work be? The natural supposition is that it is smuggling, but would that yield a large profit? The only thing now of use in California is what is needed by the miners. Jewels are not in great demand, yet—well, I suppose a few dollars might be thus turned by dealing with the people of 'Frisco, Monterey and Nuevo Madrid, but the trade would be so small that I believe there is more in the wind. What is it?"

The question was a natural one, but lacking the means of solving it Max went below, as night was already falling, to await the movements of Tim Foley.

The cavalier seemed to feel no emotion whatever in regard to the peril which menaced him. If some one was trying to play a practical joke, he would not have taken it more coolly. Perhaps he had shaken hands with danger too often to feel the faintest tinge of uneasiness, but brave indeed must be the man who can school himself to that point.

Once more alone, he looked carefully to his pistols, and then sat down to await the sunset.

An hour passed, and then Tim Foley appeared, his face full of triumph and eagerness.

"Begorra, an' we mustn't lose a blissid minute," he said. "It's meself dhat has lowered a boat, an' ef we are loively we can get ashore widout a wet fut!"

This was far better luck than Long-Haired Max had dared to expect, and he at once arose.

"Lead the way!" was his terse direction.

They went to the deck. The Water Witch was still speeding northward, parting the water as though in pride, but the darkness hung heavily over the sea, and the barren coast was no longer visible off at the starboard.

All was quiet on the deck. Few of the seamen were visible, but a little red point of fire near the larboard rail served to mark the position of Captain Peters; it was one of his notions to smoke fast and furiously every night in this way.

The two men did not pause to observe him, but hastening to the starboard side they found the boat as Tim had left it, and quickly descending they cast off, and then saw the Water Witch speed on her way, leaving them alone on the water—an eggshell of a boat only between them and eternity, but with a placid sea beneath all.

CHAPTER II.

THE MYSTERY DEEPENS.

NOT a word was spoken by the men until the schooner was far enough on her way to be no longer feared, and then Tim Foley broke into a chuckle.

"Bedad! an' that was n'ately done," he said, in high glee. "We hev not only saved ourselves, but got away wid dheir boat. Oh! be

me sowl, but won't dhere be a circus whin dhe cap'n toinds it out! In me drames I kin hear his curses rolling sw'ately over the say."

"Better that way than in reality," replied Long-Haired Max, with his usual coolness. "I don't hold Jabez Peters in awe, but a man with a blind eye can see that he is bad. With that precious crew of his, the battle would have been warm for me if you hadn't given me a lift. I owe you one, Tim, and I'm a liar if I don't repay it to your good."

"Phat I did was an even thing, messmate, for whin I helped yez I helped meself; but if ye want a man like me to foight in your l'ade, just say dhe worrud, an' it's on deck I am."

"We will cruise together for a while, but we don't want to drift south."

Tim took the hint and the oars at one and the same time, and swinging the boat's nose due northeast, he began pulling a fine stroke.

"Excellent!" commented Max. "At this rate we will reach Nuevo Madrid before daylight, and concealing our boat under the coast bluffs, we will saunter into the quiet old Mexican town and no one will know whence we came. I don't care to have every man know my business."

"It's meself is now sailing on an untried say," observed Tim. "I was niver in California, except wan day in Frisco. Phat sort av a place is dis Nuevo Madrid?"

"Like all the settlements of the region. Originally owned by Mexico, a mixed population has sprung up since the Pacific territory passed into the hands of the United States. American thrift labors and perspires, and Mexican slothfulness pays for it."

"Phat chance is dhere for a dacent b'ye to make his living?"

"You shall not want, Tim, if you stick close to me. I'm going to Nuevo Madrid on a work of danger, and I shall call down on my devoted head a spirit of destruction which may take me off my pins. Just you anchor near me and we will pull together."

"Do yez mane it?"

"Yes."

"Thin, by dhe powers, we are messmates from dhis out!"

Tim put out one hand and Max promptly reciprocated; but a sudden thought came to the Irishman.

"Begorra, I've lost me wits, I'm thinking," he said. "I hope ye'll excuse me wurruds. It's not for dhe loikes ave me to be your messmate; but though a fray an' aquil American citizen, it's not ashamed I am to be your servant."

"Rest easy there, old man; we pull together, and that's enough. Call the union what you will—it's all one in the long run."

And so Tim Foley pulled on toward the shore and Long-Haired Max sat at his ease, both far more comfortable than they would have been had they been forced to make the distance by swimming.

Once, the younger man offered to take his turn at the oars, but Tim would not allow it. Twenty years of water life had made him proficient, and his muscles like iron, and to row was no more than a machine-like motion to him.

The Water Witch had long since disappeared in the darkness, but the barren shore was at all times dimly visible at she starboard, so the lone boatmen had no feeling of uneasiness.

A short pull would at any time take them ashore.

Two hours passed. Max, wrapped in his cloak, had fallen into deep thought and was oblivious of all around him, but the sailor, always practical, did not fail to use his eyesight.

"Bedad!" he finally said, abruptly, "I'm thinking dhere's dhe town already."

The cavalier aroused.

"Impossible!" he said. "You have half an hour's pull ahead of you."

"Thin phat is that loight?"

"A loight! Where is it? Ah! I see."

Long-Haired Max did see, and the sight was one which filled him with surprise. Off toward the coast a light was plainly visible, but it was not such a one as he expected to see.

A bonfire at that point would have aroused a sort of languid surprise; but this light was small and red, scarcely larger than that the Water Witch carried at her binnacle at night.

The close resemblance caused him to think for a moment that they were near a vessel, but a closer survey showed him that not only was the object stationary, but that it was at least a hundred feet above the water level.

"Begorra," continued Tim, "it looks loike dhe rid loight they used whin I worruded on dhe railroad."

"Stop rowing and let the boat drift," said Max. "I want a further look at that thing."

Tim obeyed, and in utter silence they watched for two or three minutes. The mysterious light remained stationary, burning steadily, and the Irishman began to show some uneasiness.

"Wull you till me ef it is spirits?" he finally asked.

"Not a single ghost, my good man. I tell you the light is as earthly as you and I, and its makers are no more, but it is a suspicious affair. Now, it is evident that it is elevated on top of a

cliff, and, as you suggested, it proceeds from a red-glass lantern. Now, why is it burned?"

"As a signal."

"Exactly, but, by whom and for whom?"

Tim scratched his head.

"Divil a bit can I tell," he acknowledged.

"Nor I. I know this coast well, and that is why I am so puzzled. Old man, suppose you pull for it, soft and slow."

Foley promptly assented. His momentary fears had vanished, and, as he was as brave as a lion when confronting human foes, he was actually eager to solve the mystery.

He began to pull as Max had directed, showing admirable skill and causing scarcely a ripple, and in this way they approached the shore.

Meanwhile, the red light burned as before.

Once, the cavalier had looked out over the water for a responsive light, but in vain; but as that on the cliff began to swing from side to side like the pendulum of a clock, he again looked seaward.

This time he was not disappointed, for, though at first nothing was visible, two lights suddenly appeared side by side, one red, the other green.

The cavalier's face brightened. Now, he knew beyond question that the first one shown was a signal, and that the others were aboard a vessel, and the only point unsettled was why all this was done, and who was concerned in it.

Max was wholly at fault. In the name of the wonderful, what was there on that barren shore to call for secrecy and mystery?

"Bedad, I'm thinking dhat is dhe Water Witch," remarked Tim, pointing seaward.

Sure enough, what was more likely than that the vessel was the schooner? Tim had learned that she had a business not visible to the chance observer, a business for which her ostensible traffic was but a blind, and, consequently, an illegitimate business.

Long-Haired Max did not doubt the correctness of his companion's reasoning; he believed that the Water Witch had anchored off the Nuevo Madrid bar.

"I have a notion for looking into this matter," he said. "Pull on, as cautiously as possible, and I will watch the way. Perhaps we will meet some one on the way, but, if not, we will try to learn what the light on the cliff means."

Once more, the Irishman promptly obeyed, and they soon passed the inner bar, floated between two miniature capes and were in a small harbor below the main one of Nuevo Madrid.

As Long-Haired Max well knew, only the bleakest kind of coast framed in that bit of water, and as the country beyond was barren and unproductive, there was positive proof that whoever frequented the place by night, and in such a fashion, must have a secret to hide; and a vast majority of secrets have marks of the cloven hoof somewhere about them.

Not far had they proceeded across the bar, however, before the cavalier suddenly held up his hand and Tim raised his oars quickly.

Both men plainly heard the sound of rowing between them and the cliff, and it needed only a moment's attention to show them that the strange craft was approaching.

At a word from Max, the Irishman noiselessly sent their own boat well to one side, and then they awaited the result.

The strangers approached, and, though they pulled with the ease of old seamen, it was plain that they feared no discovery, otherwise greater caution would have been observed.

Nearer yet, and then Max saw a boat pulling four oars and containing a dozen men. They were heading straight for the open water, and proceeding like those who know their way.

The watchers looked most earnestly, but there was little to be seen in the darkness. If there was a cargo of any kind aboard it was invisible.

Pulling easily, the boat went on and disappeared over the inner bar.

"Shall we follow?" Tim eagerly asked.

"No," said Max, with sudden energy. "Our work is with the men on shore. Pull for the light on the cliff as fast as you can and not make too much noise."

Foley obeyed, and impelled by his powerful strokes the boat shot rapidly forward. Max had seen the red light when they started, but it soon disappeared, owing to their own position, he thought; and he did not suspect that they were too late until, after landing and making a hard scramble up the rocks, they reached the top and found the cliff dark, barren and, to all appearance, deserted.

"Begorra, an' it's b'aten we be," muttered Tim.

"Sure as shooting, old man. I'm sorry, but we may as well take it coolly, and in the meanwhile, watch the lights from the vessel."

Out on the surface of the water the twin lights, red and green, still burned, and it was not until five minutes later that they, too, were removed. They were not extinguished, but, as their movements betrayed, carried below.

Then followed a faint sound which was like the raising of a boat, and the night drama was over.

"Bedad! an' I'm thinking we've got into a nist ov fraybooters," observed Foley.

"I never was more puzzled," Long-Haired

Max confessed. "Though never a resident of Nuevo Madrid, I have lived enough on this coast to render my perplexity all the greater. I tell you I can not conceive of an object for all this secrecy. Nuevo-Madrid would not use enough of silks and jewels to keep a smuggler alive over night. Few people there dress expensively, and such as do are old Spanish families who would buy only of those of their own nationality, while to deal with smugglers would be very unlike them. Such men as Don Ramon Victoria are above suspicion."

The last words were musingly spoken.

Tim offered some theories, but as none were reasonable enough for him to believe in them himself, we need not say that Max was not helped thereby.

A close search of the vicinity failed to reveal any sign of the red light or of its makers, and as the top of the cliff was bare rock, there was no chance to come by day and track the strangers.

"We'll niver know who dhey was," lamented Tim, when they finally descended to their boat and pulled away toward Nuevo Madrid.

"I'm not so sure of that. I've sought this coast on a mission of war and pestilence, and I may have time to look into this red light mystery. Just hang on to the tail of the kite, Tim, and you may see stars before we cast off grappling-irons. Yonder sleepy town has the elements for a big bubbling when once the fire is set in motion."

"Begorra, an' I'm wid you!" Tim declared.

CHAPTER III.

BEARDING THE LION IN HIS DEN.

THAT night, Long-Haired Max and his ally slept in the shadow of a cliff, near Nuevo Madrid, and when they sauntered into the town the following morning, no one suspected that they were comers from the sea.

The little coast town was one of those singular mixtures of two nationalities so common along the line between the United States and Mexico, and American enterprise and tropical languor stood out in marked contrast.

Of the Mexicans, the majority were of the poorer classes, and afflicted with numerous little frailties such as a disposition to steal, lie, cheat, and use their *cuchillos* on an enemy's spinal column; but there were a few of those grand old gentlemen of pure Spanish blood who carry their inborn nobility through all.

The business of the place was chiefly done by Americans, however; and it may as well go on record that many of these sharp dealers were not so veracious as the Divine commandment requires.

The chief ruler was Mayor Napoleon Jones, a peculiar genius who was all American, and yet, every one ignored his English title and he was universally called Alcalde Jones.

Of him, more anon.

Long-Haired Max led the way to the Catskill Hotel, an institution conducted by a native of New York, and there he and Tim Foley were soon lodged. While eating breakfast, the cavalier asked for all the news, but the host declared there was none; and Max was soon satisfied that, whatever might be the mystery of the Water Witch, she had not aroused the curiosity, or even the notice, of the townspeople.

It was not until after the heat of the day was past that the cavalier said to Tim:

"I told you that I had come to Nuevo Madrid on business, and that business now calls me away. I may be gone several hours, so you need not look for me until I return."

"Bedad, it's meself kin kill dhe toime," the Irishman declared. "Have yez moinded dhe pretty waiter gurrul dhey have here? Sure, an' I think I have made an impression, an' I shall manage to pass dhe toime p'acefully an' well."

Max laughed and went away, soon leaving the village and passing to the country which lay back of it. Not very fertile was this land as a rule, but there were notable exceptions. Side by side lay two ranches, where the fields were waving with indigenous grain, where the orange was successfully cultivated and the honey-gathering bee well looked after.

These industries are common to the region at the present time, but at that of which we write, few men had had the boldness to strike out so extensively and so successfully.

Long-Haired Max had seen both of these ranch-owners, though he never spoken with either. One was a Spaniard, the Don Ramon Victoria before mentioned; the other, an American named Barstow, an ex-colonel of the army which followed Scott to the city of Mexico in the, then, late war.

No fence separated the two ranches, but the line was well staked and neither owner had ever complained to the other.

Following the main road, Max looked thoughtfully at the two forms as he walked, and, among other things, he saw an old ruin on the side which ran north and south. This ruin as he well knew, was all that remained of a once prosperous mission. The place had fallen into decay, and, lacking means to rebuild, the priests had for some time disappeared; and only

returned when, after the war, the improved aspect of business caused them to erect a new building in the edge of the village.

Meanwhile, decay went on with the deserted mission, and the crumbling walls looked mournful enough as Long-Haired Max surveyed them.

The object of these details will appear further on in our story.

Without pausing, the cavalier walked on until he reached the house of Colonel Barstow, a building put together on a plan to suit the owner, and slightly resembling the Mexican *casas*.

Built of *adobes*, the house proper was square in form and surmounted by an *azotea*, while all around it extended an *adobe* wall twelve feet high, one-fourth as thick, and with a heavy iron gate at the single entrance.

Taken all in all, it was more like a fort or wall-surrounded city of the Middle Ages than like a modern residence, but those who might otherwise have wondered found an explanation for all in the fact that its owner had been a soldier.

Despite its forbidding aspect, Long-Haired Max was courteously received by the servants, and in a short time he was admitted to the presence of the owner—Colonel Barstow.

The latter was alone in his private room, and when the visitor entered he arose; and those two men whose after lives were to be so strangely linked together stood face to face.

Max saw a man fifty years of age, with hair, mustache and goatee of gray, but with a hardy form, a military air, and a rather strong face.

That face, however, was not a prepossessing one. Not easy to read, Colonel Barstow could hide under its exterior his secret thoughts, his changing moods; but he could not change the small, furtive, forbidding eyes, or a certain expression over all which told that he was selfish, treacherous, cold and unfeeling.

Seen in a prisoner's dock, every one would have pronounced him a born villain; but as the rich and influential master of Barstow Hall, few looked further than his money-bags in giving him his niche in society.

Had they done so, it would merely have been lost time; golden dollars form a bridge by which a man may cross almost any stream.

"Well, sir," said this man, after he had looked Long-Haired Max carefully over without allowing his face to tell any tales, "can I be of service to you?"

"You can, if so disposed," said the cavalier, tersely.

"I will hear your business."

"You never promise in advance, I suppose."

"Rarely," and the colonel smiled. "Be seated, sir."

They sat down, so near each other that a third person could barely have passed between them.

"I'll come to the point at once," said Long-Haired Max. "You are a man of business, and I like the way. I must preface all by a story, however. You were, I believe, in the Mexican war."

"I was, sir," Barstow proudly said.

"And yet, I believe, your title was not won on any battle-field."

"You are mistaken!" quickly and irritably declared Barstow. "I was at Cerro Gordo, Chapultepec and other red fields."

"We will not discuss the matter," said Max, "though I have been informed that your duty was merely in forwarding supplies and the like, that you were never in battle, and never smelt powder."

"Sir, do you mean to insult me?" thundered Barstow, putting on a ferocious look.

"No, sir; that is not my object. All I care to establish is the fact that you were in Galveston at the time the American troops were withdrawn from Mexican soil."

"What if I was?"

"It is not a case of 'if.' My information is most reliable, and I know you were there. Let me tell you what occurred one night in the little office from which you had done your business for the previous six months—"

"See here," interrupted the colonel savagely. "I tell you I was at Chapultepec, and now you insist that I was in Galveston all the while. I do not intend to be insulted in my own house, and if you repeat those words you shall be thrown out!"

"Such being the case, of course I shall not repeat them," said Long-Haired Max, with a coolness which amounted to indifference. "Yet I humbly ask leave to tell you what occurred one evening in your office."

Barstow leaned back in his chair, his face unreadable, but his small, furtive eyes fixed on the face of his visitor with more than ordinary earnestness.

"Go on," he tersely said.

"One evening, after you believed business wholly completed for the night, a man entered your office, and dropped heavily into a chair. You looked at him, and saw a man very near death. Pale and thin, he could scarcely stand, and you probably wondered if he would die on your hands."

Helping himself to a cigar, the colonel lighted it, and leaned back in his chair.

"Go on," he placidly said.

"You did not recognize the man, though you had known him before, but he soon revealed his identity. He was named Ernest Baldwin."

The narrator paused, looking full at Barstow, but that calm face did not change.

"Did his weakness arise from drunkenness?" the colonel steadily asked.

A terrible light leaped into the cavalier's eyes, his mouth trembled, and his face became white with passion.

"Cowardly bound!" he exclaimed, like one choking; "dare to repeat those words, and I will shoot you!"

Barstow shrugged his shoulders.

"You are hot-tempered," he said.

"Enough so to protect the honor and memory of that man. He, at least, had fought in battle; he had a bullet in his side, and it was that wound which made his once strong form weak and trembling."

"And what, may I ask, was he to you?"

"My father!" Long-Haired Max said, in a husky voice.

CHAPTER IV.

LONG-HAIRED MAX DEMANDS JUSTICE.

COLONEL BARSTOW heard this assertion with his usual imperturbability.

"In which case, I suppose your name is also Baldwin," he said.

"It is, sir; I am named Max Baldwin."

"Why, I should have taken you for a Mexican," and the colonel glanced at the cavalier's dress with a perceptible sneer.

"Unlike you, I do not deal in suppositions: I state only what I can prove," said Max, now icily calm.

"Go on," once more said Barstow.

"My father, sir, though an honest man, had the blood of a rover in his veins, and, when Texas first began her struggle for freedom, he left his Northern home and enlisted under the banner of the Lone Star. At the time he called at your office he had not heard from his family for five years."

"Not a very affectionate man," commented Barstow.

"That, sir, is not for you to judge. Suffice it to say, he explained as much to you that evening in Galveston. He told more. He related how, during his service near the end of the war, he had one night, when separated from his companions, found a hut among the mountains of Mexico. Within the hut was an aged man who lay at the point of death, a man who was, before the war, one of a band of banditti. All the others joined the army, but this one, too old for service, remained to guard their stolen wealth."

"A pleasant occupation."

"Judging by your own record, I have no doubt but what you think so; but I do doubt if you would have proved a safe guard," Max pointedly said.

"We will not argue. Go on," said Barstow, with a wave of his hand.

"The old robber was true to his trust, but at last he lay near death's door and all his courage fled. In this condition my father found him. Not to prolong my story, let me briefly say he nursed the man to the end, caring for him tenderly, and the robber, touched by all this, revealed to him the secret of the buried wealth. He died, and my father dug up the gold. There was an immense pile of it, a hundred thousand dollars in all, but he resolved to secure and carry it back to the United States."

"Was not that burglary, highway robbery, or something of the kind?"

"It was not. None of the robbers were there to claim it, and if they had been 'twas not theirs, since they had stolen it. With the original owners unaccounted for, it was as much Ernest Baldwin's as though it had been in crude form."

"We will not argue; go on."

"My father brought the gold to Texas unsuspected, but he also brought a bullet received at Chapultepec, and when he entered your office he was near death. He had known you in the old days, previous to '45, and he came to you as a friend. He knew he must die, but he wished to send his wealth to his family at the North. He offered you five thousand dollars to see the work faithfully done, and you swore that it should be so. The money was paid you, my father wrote a letter to his wife, and then he lay down in your office to sleep through the night. In the morning he was dead."

"It was a long night for him," sneered Barstow.

"The God of the universe had not intended it for his last. Can you tell me what thwarted the Divine will?"

Long-haired Max leaned forward and fixed a burning gaze on the colonel, and for the first time that man moved uneasily.

"No," he sullenly said.

"His life went out by a murderer's hands; he was strangled and robbed of that faint breath of life yet remaining to him. You, Colonel Barstow, were his murderer!"

Looking straight into the elder man's eyes, Long-Haired Max hissed forth the words with

terrible force. Nothing less than a rock could have withstood his terrible accusation, and Barstow leaped to his feet, his face almost as pale as his companion's, his composure far less.

"Liar!" he almost gasped; and then, out from his garments came a revolver, a sharp click—click! accompanying the movement.

Another moment and the muzzle was turned full upon Long-Haired Max.

It was not fired. Quick as he had been, the younger man thwarted him. His large, white hand closed around the revolver wrist, and by the power of that one arm he forced the colonel back in his chair, while the weapon fell to the floor.

"Sit still, you dog!" said Max, his voice strangely calm.

Barstow obeyed. Never before in his life had he felt such a grip as that; it almost seemed as though his wrist was crushed into pieces; and, conscious that he was in the presence of his master, he sat motionless, a gray look on his face.

It was not that the accusation had come to him unexpectedly, for he had for some moments expected it, but the manner in which he had been foiled showed him with what a terrible adversary he had to deal.

Long-Haired Max raised the revolver, laid it beyond the colonel's reach, and quietly added:

"The son will never die as died the father!"

A curse fell from Barstow's lips.

"Finish your story!" he snarled, with reviving courage.

"I will make it simple. My father was buried in Galveston and nothing remained except for you to perform your trust. Did you do it? No; not one penny of that fortune ever came to the Baldwin family; you kept the whole, and it was that money which purchased this ranch and built this house!"

"Well?"

"Well, now, I, the son of Ernest Baldwin, am here to claim my own!"

"The hundred thousand dollars?"

"Yes."

"You will not get it."

"Why not?"

"Because your story is too wild for ever a Munchausen's credence. Should you make the charge officially, its improbability would kill it at first sight. The dullest judge on earth would throw you out of court."

"So you think my case hopeless?"

"Yes."

"And yet, Colonel Barstow, you shall deliver that hundred thousand dollars into my hands!"

Long-Haired Max spoke in a tone of implacable hostility and firmness, and for a moment the colonel seemed alarmed; but he forced a laugh and retorted:

"I defy you!"

"In that case, I shall send you to the gallows."

"On the strength of your own word?"

"On that of a man who witnessed the murder."

Barstow started in fresh consternation, and his friends of Nuevo Madrid would have been amazed at seeing him.

"Who is this man?" he asked.

"I have omitted to state that when my father called on you, he was accompanied by one Neil Marcy, a fellow Texan ranger. Such, however, was the fact, and Marcy saw and heard all. You will also recollect that you gave him five thousand dollars to forever keep the secret."

"I did nothing of the kind!" Barstow declared.

"Marcy will swear to all I have said."

"Where is he?"

"Where your hand cannot reach him, but where I can produce him whenever I see fit. More than this, I can produce the man who dug my father's grave, a man to whom you gave a hundred dollars after he had discovered the marks of your assassin fingers on your victim's neck."

The colonel breathed heavily and was plainly very much disturbed, but he saw the need of a strong defense and he forced all of his energy to the front.

"Well, sir, I have heard your little fiction with due patience, but I assure you that your game will not work. Either you are a black-mailer or a madman, and, in either case, you will find your time wasted. I deny all that you have said."

"And you refuse to refund the money?"

"I do."

"Perhaps you would be willing to hand over a portion of it?"

The colonel smiled coldly; he saw the trap and was not foolish enough to enter.

"Not a cent. To give you a part would be to admit your claim."

"You utterly refuse, then?"

"Yes."

"Very well; such being the case, I shall be obliged to send you to the gallows as a murderer," Long-Haired Max coolly said.

"You will be defeated, young man. I need not remind you that my present position will aid me greatly in the fight; but I must request permission to prove that I was not in Galveston, nor even in Texas, at the time you mention."

"How will you prove it?"

"First of all, I will produce one of my servants who will swear to the fact without a hint from me, and then, if you persist, I shall send East for the depositions of the major and lieutenant-colonel of my own regiment, as well as for that of General Scott."

For a moment Long-Haired Max was staggered by Barstow's confident manner, and led to wonder if his witness had deceived him, but as he remembered the colonel's recent consternation, he smiled calmly.

"This is empty talk," he said.

"You shall see. I will now call my servant."

Before Max could demur, a bell had been touched, and he resolved to let the matter proceed.

CHAPTER V.

THE COLONEL'S WITNESS.

NOT a word passed between the two men until the bell was answered. Then a Mexican appeared and Barstow directed him to send Buck Eagan to the room.

Pending his arrival Max allowed his case to rest, but the colonel was not in like mood.

"How does it happen that you present your claim at so late a day?" he asked.

"Simply because I knew nothing of it until a month ago. I accidentally encountered Marcy and he recognized me as soon as he heard my name; I mean that he saw a resemblance to Ernest Baldwin which led him to question me."

"I see. Have you been long in the Southwest?"

"Nine years."

"Possible? I should not think it from your looks. You do not seem to be more than twenty-five."

"That is just my age. I went to Texas when sixteen and served through the war that followed."

"And your family—your mother and sister?"

A look of annoyance crossed the cavalier's face.

"Excuse me if I decline to give my family history," he coldly said.

Barstow's face brightened. Through his enemy's voice and look he had detected more than Max knew. The colonel would have been willing to wager a good, round sum that he had stumbled upon a mystery; that the claimant had something to conceal. What was it?

Too wily to state his suspicions, he remained silent until the door again opened and Buck Eagan entered.

Long-Haired Max looked at him keenly. He saw a man of middle age, a stout, burly fellow, who looked like a veritable border ruffian; a loud-mouthed, swaggering braggart, half fool and all knave, a man just suited to be a tool for one of a higher mental caliber.

"Buck," said his employer, "were you with me in the Mexican war?"

"I was that, cunnel," was the prompt reply.

"What was my regiment?"

"The — New York, cunnel."

"When did I leave that regiment?"

"Right arter ther surrender o' ther city o' Mexico. You was sufferin' wi' a fever, an' you was furloughed an' went right ter New York."

"Was I in Texas at all?"

"Not after the troops crossed ther Rio Grande ter march ag'in' ther Greasers."

"You can swear to all this?"

"I kin, fur I was with you all ther time."

"Mr. Baldwin, do you wish to ask any questions?"

"No."

"No?"

"Not a question."

Long-Haired Max spoke calmly, and Barstow looked at him in a doubtful way. This seeming indifference troubled him, for it showed that the testimony of Buck Eagan had fallen on barren ground.

He sent away his man, and then the cavalier aroused.

"If you are done we will proceed," he said; "but I can no longer regard you as a sharp rascal. You are a very dull one. In your anxiety to bluff me off for the moment, you forgot that an investigation would brand you a liar. More than that, my evidence was secured in advance. Read this letter!"

Max extended the document he had taken from his pocket, and Barstow read as follows:

"MAX BALDWIN:—I am directed to say, by General Scott, and I have verified his recollection by an examination by official documents, that one James C. Barstow bore a commission as colonel in the U. S. Army during the war with Mexico; but that said Barstow never appeared on a battle-field, having been located for the greater part of the time at Galveston, where he was in charge of the supplies. He was in that place when the Mexican capital capitulated, and remained at least three months longer, when his connection with the army ceased."

This letter, written from Washington, D. C., and signed by General Scott's private secretary, was a most staggering blow to the colonel. It threw down in two sentences all his elaborately erected castles, tore away the gauze-work of

his lies, and he sat before his enemy completely exposed.

He mechanically returned the letter, and then Long-Haired Max added:

"You see I am well supplied with the sinews of war."

"Still, I defy you!" Barstow hotly cried.

"That is your own matter, not mine. Be so good as to commit the preceding sentence to your memory, so that if, when you stand on the gallows, you should appeal to me for mercy, I may still say, 'You have chosen your own road; it is not my affair!'"

"Do you think I will submit to you?" demanded the colonel, more hotly than ever.

"I expect you to struggle like a fish on a hook, but I shall land you at the end."

"I'll kill you first!"

"No doubt you have the will, but the power is lacking. James Barstow, I despise a braggart; but I will say to you that I am your master. In a game of wits I shall win every time; in a game of lead I can care for myself; and if you try to fight me, just so surely will I bring you to the gallows. I swear it!"

"We shall see," growled the colonel.

"Exactly. Well, now, the hour is getting late, and as I do not care to pass a night with you, I'll take my departure. The programme for the future is this: I'll give you one week to reflect, and it lies with you whether you yield tamely or make a fool of yourself. If at the end of the armistice you are stubborn, I shall place my case in the hands of Alcalde Jones, and you know he don't love you. In the meanwhile, it will be just as well for you not to try to run away, for it will end in smoke. I've got you foul, and I shall keep my grip."

Barstow opened his lips as though to make a quick retort, but, thinking better of it, bowed with an outward humility which was in itself a sneer.

"Your plan is so generous that I cannot refuse it," he said.

Long-Haired Max did not think an answer necessary, so he devoted all his attention to getting out of the house unharmed. Sharper by far than Barstow had credited him with being, he had seen that some understanding existed between the colonel and Buck Eagan. What it was he had no means of knowing positively, but he believed the former had managed to say to his tool, "Do not allow this man to leave the house alive;" in which case there might be trouble ahead.

Very much to the cavalier's surprise, he found no pitfalls awaiting him, the door of the house and the gate of the wall stood open, and he walked safely outside without molestation.

"I'm surprised," he muttered, looking back at the grim walls of the house. "Can Barstow have lost his courage, or— No, by Judas, it's not his way; he is not the man to surrender tamely, and there is a snare for me somewhere. What is it? The most reasonable supposition is that his good cut-throat, Buck Eagan, is ambushed by the way. I must keep my eyes open."

He turned his face toward the village and went on, but only a few paces had been passed over when he saw a dark form rapidly approaching from along the road. Twilight had given place to night, rendering exact scrutiny out of the question; but Max soon saw that the unknown was a woman, closely muffled in a shawl, and, to him, a stranger.

She came nearer, moving rapidly, but when by his side, suddenly held out a folded paper. Taken wholly by surprise, Max received it instinctively, and then the woman went on as swiftly as ever toward Barstow's.

Recovering his wits, the cavalier obeyed his first impulse and strode after her, resolved to see where she went; but, never turning her head, she glided like a specter through the gate of the colonel's house, and was gone from view.

"Infernal queer, that!" commented Long-Haired Max. "Plainly, she is a dweller under Barstow's roof, but why should she give me the note?—if such it is. Probably, I had better inquire within."

He went away for some distance, and then, striking a match, saw a few words written on the paper in a coarse, irregular hand. Without direction or signature, it was worded as follows:

"Since you know your enemy so well, you must be ready to believe that he will not yield to you tamely. Beware of the bushes just this side of the old mission. Inside them hides an assassin, and unless you use great caution you are doomed. I have warned you; now care for yourself."

Long-Haired Max laughed lightly. The note confirmed his own suspicions, and he laughed at thought of James Barstow's disappointment. He had counted the cost before making war on him, and from that time forward it would be cunning against cunning.

"Since I know where my cut-throat is concealed—it is doubtless Buck Eagan—I'll give him a little surprise. By making a *detour*, I can pass around the crest of the ridge, come down past the ruined mission, and drop on Eagan from the rear. I'll do it!"

Acting promptly, he left the road, struck into Barstow's field, and soon had the ridge under his feet. Reaching the top, just back of the

old mission, he paused for a moment to survey the scene before him. At his right lay the house of the colonel, at his left, that of Don Ramon Victoria. Both looked calm and peaceful.

Withdrawing his gaze, he looked down on the old ruin, a crumbling pile which, despite its former holy associations, now looked dark and forbidding.

Yet, the cavalier's way lay past it, and he was about to advance when a new and startling sight was presented to his gaze.

CHAPTER VI.

THE SPECTER OF THE MISSION.

IF Long-Haired Max had been of the same material as the greater part of the people of Nuevo Madrid, he would then and there have turned and fled, for superstition had a strong hold on the human mind about the town, and the sight thus favored him was of an uncanny nature.

On one of the broad, broken walls of the mission stood a figure "robed all in white," its outlines showing plainly against the dark sky, and making a picture which was vivid, if not real.

Long-Haired Max, practical in all things, believed that he saw a woman in a white robe, standing erect, silent and motionless, her hands crossed over her breast, her face turned toward him.

Her white robes were no less colorless than that face, and in every way the creature looked like a ghost of the most approved pattern.

As we have before said, nine out of every ten of the inhabitants of Nuevo Madrid would have fled at once and in utter terror at the sight, but Max Baldwin was made of sterner clay.

"Shoot me, if this isn't a first class show!" he muttered. "That female woman takes a confounded queer place for her promenade, and her dress seems to be a little objectionable for the outer air; but it isn't any of my business."

He felt that perhaps it was hardly manly to act the spy at that moment, but his curiosity overcame all other feelings, and he remained watching.

"Perhaps it's a statue, though I don't remember having seen one there before. Nonsense, the idea is absurd; motionless as she is, it is a creature of flesh and blood. Hallo! there's another one!"

Sure enough, a second creature in white had appeared close beside the first, but in no way except that remarkable whiteness were they similar.

To all appearances, the second one was a man, and his dress was that of a monk, so far as style went, but robe, cowl, face—all were of the same white hue.

The monk was not motionless. On the contrary, he was gliding along the wall with a secret, catlike step, each second drawing nearer the woman, and seeming to take great care that she should not hear him.

Nearer he crept, until he was by her side, and then he flung his left arm around her waist.

Thus far Long-haired Max had watched with more of amusement than anything else, but a deep exclamation suddenly burst from him, despite his coolness.

With a quick movement the right hand of the monk had gone up in the air, only to descend again almost instantly, straight toward the woman's breast.

The motion was one not to be misunderstood, and though Max had seen nothing in the ghostly band, he was for a moment impressed by the belief that a knife had been driven home by an assassin hand.

As though to increase his feeling, the woman, without a motion beyond the dropping of her hands, sunk back into the arms of the monk, and Max grew excited at what he thought a cowardly murder.

Without a word he bounded down the side of the ridge, going at a pace which placed his life in jeopardy, even though he paid all possible attention to where he placed his feet; but, at last, he stood safe but excited near the mission wall. Glancing upward, he perceived the dark, crumbling structure—and nothing more.

Monk and woman, murderer and victim, were gone.

All this was to be expected, in any case, but the sudden change of view acted potently on the cavalier and he stood motionless.

"Bah!" he muttered, angry at his own emotions; "there has been no murder. That was mere mummery. I say, inside there, I'll acknowledge the joke. Come out and show yourself and I'll buy the drinks to-morrow!"

It was a generous offer, but no answer was returned. The ruin remained silent and dark, and, to all appearances, he was the only person near the spot.

Once more he called, but the silence remained otherwise unbroken. He began to feel a little perplexed, though still without supernatural fear, but so strong was his faith that human beings were inside the ruin, he was about to walk around to the front and enter at the open gateway when he suddenly remembered that this might be a part of the plot to assassinate him.

Once lured inside the old walls, he could easily be disposed of and his body concealed from view.

His common-sense told him that his first impression that a murder had been committed was absurd, and he did not propose to let any false sentimentality lure him into danger.

Consequently, he retreated several paces and stood watching the vicinity.

We have before given the history of the old mission, so that it need not be repeated here; but Long-Haired Max looked with an interest born of his late experience.

Perhaps the building had never been well built, but, be that as it may, its palmy day had certainly passed. Tower, belfry, roof and walls were yielding to the hand of Time and breaches were numerous near the top, though from the foundation and ten feet upward the huge blocks of *adobe*, much larger than the average, were in the old places and tolerably firm.

Long-Haired Max watched until he grew weary, but the old monk and the lady came no more; silence reigned around the mission.

"Quite a ghostly experience," Max finally commented, laughing. "I can't solve the mystery, unless it was a trap set by Buck Eagan, and even in that case I wonder that he didn't utter a human cry for help rather than this mummery. Bah! it was not a trap for me. Ten to one if Buck had seen the sight himself he would have run like a deer; consequently, he would not expect to lure me into the ruin by such a trick. It wasn't Buck, so what the dickens was it?"

The cavalier scowled and reflected, but, finding no way to explain the ghostly event, finally abandoned the attempt.

"In the meanwhile, I've been forgetting Buck Eagan's real game, and so much time has been lost that I reckon I won't seek him in the bush. This is a night of mysteries, which leads me to wonder who gave me the warning note. She entered Barstow's fortress like one who seeks the home-base, but I never knew that he had any females there. Bah! she was probably some Mexican girl, who, thinking from my dress that I was a countryman, resolved to warn me when she discovered Barstow's purpose. Beyond a doubt that's it, and I'll get back to my hotel."

He was about to start when he saw a man coming up the side of the ridge, and already near the old mission.

This building, it will be remembered, stood very near the dividing line between the ranches owned by Colonel Barstow and Don Ramon Victoria, respectively, and was something like a hundred yards from the main road.

Leading from the latter, a smaller track led up the ascent, past the mission and over the top of the ridge, but it was not a public road. Some time before some improvements made by the colonel had caused him to draw rocks and earth down to the road until a well-defined track was thus made, and up this track the unknown was coming.

Seeing him, Long-Haired Max stood still and watched.

Straight forward came the traveler, and then, leaving the colonel's road, he paused beside the northern wall of the mission.

"Aha!" muttered Max, "that has a business look. To all appearances he comes to meet some one. Who? I have a good mind to look into the matter, for it strikes me the fellow is concerned with these ghosts; and, by Judas, I will!"

He had started forward when he saw another man appear as the first had done, walk to the wall and greet his predecessor.

The sight decided the cavalier, and with quick steps he went down the ridge, keeping the mission walls carefully between him and the other men.

Once there he was obliged to pause, for in only one way could he see any hope of overhearing their conversation. By entering the building at the gateway he could gain the broken wall directly above them; and though what he had that evening seen about the place would have deterred a man less bold, he resolved to attempt it.

He glided through the gateway with his revolver drawn and cocked. He was in utter darkness and dead silence, but he did not yield to any cowardly or natural fear.

Straight forward he went, directing his course toward the northern wall, and though he once or twice stumbled over pieces of loosened masonry he met no human foe and reached the interior of the wall in due time.

Caution then became necessary, but all else was easy. At that point the roof had fallen in entirely, and on the fragments he climbed to the top of the wall and looked down.

Below him the men still stood, and one of the two was speaking earnestly.

"You understand," were the first words that Long-Haired Max heard, "that there must be no failure in this matter. It is my only chance for winning the girl, for I am not so big a fool as to believe that she cares for me, and it must not fail. You hear me—it must not!"

"Caramba! did you ever know me to fail?"

"You have done very well in the past, but we have never before played for so big stakes. If

the plan succeeds, I shall be a rich man and you shall also roll in gold. Don't forget what I have told you. I am to meet her in the grove at nine o'clock, you understand, and as she will not remain long with me, you must act promptly. Attack me furiously—though don't strike too hard when you hit me over the head—and be as brutal as you can to the girl without doing her actual injury. Be sure to impress her with the idea that you are in dead earnest."

"Trust me, senior, and I'll not fail you. The don's orange grove, at nine?"

"Exactly."

"I'll be there, sure."

"Enough, then. I have business, so we will not delay here. Will you go to the village?"

"No; my way is north."

They went down the ridge, leaving Max alone.

"Well, here I've stumbled on another mystery, a web of iniquity, a plot against some female. It is an interesting state of affairs, but, somehow, I feel as though it is destined to fail. I reckon I'll happen around and see what is going on—but, hold on; these fellows didn't say what evening the game is to be played. I'm all at sea. I can't go and sit in the don's orange grove—I reckon he meant Don Ramon Victoria—every night, waiting for these folks to come around. Hang it! why didn't he mention a name or two so that I could catch his meaning?"

It did seem as though the man had been negligent, but Max soon decided that he had been the greatest transgressor himself, if he really wished to help the unknown girl.

Had he promptly followed the chief plotter, he might at least have discovered who he was, but he had allowed the chance to slip and there was no use of complaining.

Plainly, both men had been Mexicans, and Max judged that one was of the upper and the other of the lower classes, but that afforded little clew.

Dismissing the subject for the time, he walked rapidly toward the village and had almost reached his hotel when he saw a well-known form just leaving the door.

It was that of Buck Eagan.

Chuckling, Long-Haired Max stepped to one side and concealed himself until the fellow was opposite his refuge; then, stepping out, he slapped him on the shoulder.

"Hallo, old man!" he bluffed said. "Have you been after your poison?"

Eagan hesitated and even in the dim light Max saw that there was a struggle in his mind. Beyond a doubt he wished to attempt to kill the cavalier then and there, but, being so close to the hotel, he dared not risk it.

Consequently, he forced a sickly smile.

"Yes; that's the way on't," he said.

"Going home, now?"

"Yes."

"Then, be so good as to say to the colonel that his game did not work; also, you may as well say to him that he had better buck against a Texan norther than Long-Haired Max. Buck, old man, how did you find life in the bush, while waiting to knife me?"

"What? Durn et, what d'ye mean?" Eagan said, in mixed confusion and indignation.

"Simply that you have no fool to deal with now, my dear Buck. When Barstow called you into his room, to lie to me, he managed to say to you, somehow, 'Hide outside and kill this man.' You hid, but I did not come to your net, so you called at the hotel to see if I was here. I've shown up at last, you see, and you can so report to Barstow. Good-day!"

With the last word the cavalier gave his companion a push which nearly threw him down; and then went on to the hotel.

Buck Eagan recovered his balance and burst into a storm of oaths. Once he took a step toward the hotel, as though to seek revenge, but, changing his mind, turned and went on toward Colonel Barstow's.

CHAPTER VII.

EL CASA VICTORIA.

SOMEWHAT back from the coast, there stood, at the date of which we write, a house of more than ordinary pretensions for Southern California. Built in the style of the dwellings of the richer classes of Mexico, it had its grim walls, its *patio* and its *azotea*, and in all ways it spoke of wealth and good taste.

Around it were many acres of fertile land, and there flourished grains and fruit, there the nimble *vaguero* looked to his herds or watched the flight of small honey-gatherers, for bee-culture was one of the many industries of the ranch.

The owner of all this magnificence—for such it was, when compared with Southern California in general—was Don Ramon Victoria.

The amount of energy necessary to carry on all this work seemed a strange fact when the almost universal indolence of the Spanish Mexican is considered, but Don Ramon was no common man. Springing from the best stock of old Spain, his ancestors had come to the New World in the eighteenth century, and Ramon had been born near the city of Mexico.

At the age of twenty-one, he found himself the youngest of four sons and the heir of poverty.

With commendable resolution, he started northward and finally settled near Nuevo Madrid, where he proceeded to put in practice his plans for making a fortune.

In this he succeeded, and soon marrying, he went on steadily and serenely toward success. When California became a part of the United States, he saw himself transformed from a subject of one country to that of another, but the change more than pleased him.

Possessed of so much energy himself, he saw that the change would be for the benefit of California. Vigor of brain and muscle were needed to bring the land to anything like proper condition, and he gave his hand freely to the conquerors.

At the date of our story, Don Ramon was a widower with one child, a daughter, named Inez. He was a noted man in those days, too, for nowhere along the coast was there a plantation which could equal his.

The poorer residents, whether Mexican or *Americano*, looked with respect, awe and envy on the solid walls of *Casa Victoria*, as his house was called.

So much to introduce Don Ramon.

One afternoon, shortly previous to the scenes before related, a horse and rider approached *Casa Victoria*. The horse was a mustang, old and homely, the rider was a lady, handsome and still less than middle-aged.

In point of fact, she was probably thirty years of age, and her face and form were pleasing and attractive, though she was far paler than the children of the land of the sun usually are.

On that face, so delicate and refined in every feature, there were lines which told of trouble, and in her brown eyes a look of settled sadness; yet it was a gentle, kind, and pure face, giving proof to the keen observer that she had been unfortunate rather than wicked.

Her dress was a plain black, serviceable cloth, and as no ornaments were visible at neck, ear or fingers, she almost looked like one in mourning.

Reaching the *casa*, she was duly attended to by the servants, and, when her business was made known, ushered into a richly-furnished room.

She waited anxiously for the next step in the errand which had brought her there. So much was at stake that she trembled at thought of failure.

After a short delay a door opened, a step sounded and she looked up quickly.

Before her stood a man fit for a model of a Spanish *hidalgo*.

It was Don Ramon Victoria.

He was at that time nearly fifty years of age, and in his once jet black hair and beard were many gray hairs, but he was still erect, hardy and strong of body and mind.

His dress was wholly free from ostentation, but it was rich, after the fashion of his countrymen, and as seemed due his station, while his whole air was so impressive that the visitor scarcely needed the explanation which followed.

"Pardon me," this gentleman said, "but I am informed that you wish to see me. I am Don Ramon Victoria."

He spoke in a voice at once clear, manly and gentle, and he bowed before this plainly-dressed little woman as courteously as though she had been adorned in flashing diamonds.

On her own part, she felt her heart throb like a drum, and when she spoke her voice trembled slightly. There was so much at stake—so very much.

"Yes, senior, I do; you were correctly informed. I—I have heard that you wish to engage a—a companion for the *Señorita Inez*."

"A companion who can teach the English language in its purity and entirety, and who can at the same time instruct her in the ways of American polite society," amended Don Ramon, somewhat ponderously.

"Yes, senior. Well, now you see my business with you; I have called to apply for the situation."

The little lady in black looked earnestly, almost imploringly at the face before her. It was unreadable; she saw only the former dignity, kindness and well-bred courtesy.

"We will discuss the matter," said Don Ramon, becoming seated for the first time. "Pardon me, but your name—"

"Is Miss Lingard—Frances Lingard."

"Ah, yes. You are an American, of course, and, I suppose, you received your education at the East?"

"At Philadelphia, senior—and it is thorough, I assure you."

"And—pardon me, Miss Lingard—but have you a knowledge of the ways of polite society?"

Don Ramon seemed to feel the question a delicate one to address to this lady who had so refined a face, and he purposely averted his gaze, thus missing the strange look which passed over her face.

Fear and anguish were expressed there, and perhaps more; and she seemed on the point of bursting into tears, but a powerful effort enabled her to retain a degree of composure.

"I—I have moved in the best society of

Philadelphia, senior, but my circumstances are changed now. I am no longer wealthy, and I must—work!"

The emotion, the tremor in her voice, went straight to the heart of the Spanish gentleman, and he spoke with unusual quickness.

"Ah! yes, yes," he said. "Things are so uncertain in this world, Miss Lingard, and you have my sympathy. Let us drop the subject. I have no doubt you will prove entirely satisfactory."

The reader must not suppose from the remark that Don Ramon was a creature of wax, already fascinated by the gentle-voiced lady before him. He was at once gentlemanly, observing, and wise. He was human enough to think about as follows: "I believe this young woman to be a well-educated and experienced lady; I will try her, and if she does not prove satisfactory, I can let her go;" but he gave no outward sign of his thoughts, but continued aloud:

"I am, Miss Lingard, a Spaniard of unmixed blood, though born in Mexico. My daughter, Inez, whose descent is the same on her mother's side, is a native of California. If I could be born again, I would be an American rather than any other countryman, for I admire the race for their energy, their honesty, and their unselfishness."

"They are not all honest and unselfish," said Miss Lingard, the strange look again passing over her face.

"Of course there are exceptions. Yet, I like them so well as a race that, had I a son, I would send him to the East to be educated. Unluckily, I have only a daughter. Yet, I intend that even she shall go East at some future day, and show people what a Victoria can be!"

The don spoke earnestly. His handsome head was thrown further back, and in every way he showed the pride of a father and a Victoria.

"It is to fit her for the best society of Philadelphia, New York, and Washington, that I wish to enage a companion. Inez speaks English well, but I would have her perfect in the language, in all its branches, as well as in French and German."

"I can teach the three," said Miss Lingard.

"Very good. You will find Inez a willing and intelligent pupil, both as regards book-learning and the ways of society. Do not neglect the latter, Miss Lingard, for I wish my daughter to be able to appear at the reception of the American President with as much grace and ease as she now has to adorn a Spanish gathering of the kind."

Miss Lingard saw very clearly. Don Ramon, with all his kindness of heart, was proud of his family and of his daughter. It would be the greatest of earthly pleasures to him if he could see her shake Washington from end to end of the fashionable quarter, by the power of her beauty and her mental gifts, and in that hour the new teacher resolved to do her part.

She was formally engaged at a good salary and a room assigned her, but as Inez Victoria was away for the day and evening she did not see her then.

That evening, seated at her window, Miss Lingard looked long and earnestly out at the dusky shadows of the night, where the curtained outlines of a scene of rare interest were spread before her, but she saw them not.

Once alone in her room, her first act had been to show the exultation any one would naturally feel over such a success.

She had traveled far to obtain the situation, she had prayed on the way that she might not fail, and, after giving away to her delight for a while as before stated, she did not fail to give thanks that her prayer had been answered.

Then, looking out into the night with eyes that saw nothing, so deeply was she thinking, she allowed her mind to wander over the past and present, and she wondered what the future would be.

"Heaven grant that this may be the refuge, the haven of safety, it seems to be. Surely, no one can find me in this remote spot, and here I will remain as long as I can. Ah! it will be so good to be at rest, to be free from the shadow of my life! But, will it be so? Will my Eden remain free from the serpent? Perhaps—perhaps some one will tell Don Ramon all, and then he will cast me out as though I were a viper. Heaven grant that he may never know!"

Well it was for the little woman in black that Don Ramon did not know her thoughts. He had not seemed to remember that it was strange that so educated a lady, a former resident of Philadelphia, should be in this California land, under such humble circumstances. The fact that she came on a mustang amounted to nothing, for there was no other way to come, but it seemed that there was a secret in her life.

Perhaps proud, upright Don Ramon would yet regret the day Miss Lingard came to Casa Victoria.

CHAPTER VIII.

DONNA INEZ.

IN the morning, Miss Lingard met the daughter of Don Ramon. Ordinarily, when we make acquaintances, we bestow but a brief glance

upon them, and the meeting causes scarcely a ripple at the time, for we know we can erect an impassable barrier of reserve at the first feeling of dislike; but all this chance is denied us when we meet those whom we know we are to see and know intimately in the future.

Thus the meeting of Miss Lingard and Inez Victoria was an important one in their lives, but Don Ramon, watching keenly could see that they were pleased.

The governess, as Miss Lingard was to be called, saw in Inez a tall, graceful girl who looked to be twenty years of age; a typical daughter of the tropics, with her graceful form, abundant black hair, dark, velvet-like eyes, intelligent face and warm smile.

From the moment their hands touched they were friends, and Inez, after the fashion of her people, was willing to swear it would be a permanent feeling, but neither, lacking the far-seer's vision, knew of the quicksands which lay along their paths.

Several days glided peacefully on, however, and the governess was beginning to feel wholly at home and almost wholly happy.

To her, Donna Inez was always as kind as though no difference existed in their worldly stations; the unpleasant fact that she was a dependent was never forced into her face. The Spanish girl was invariably kind, pleasant, and, as a pupil, persevering and eager to learn.

As Don Ramon had been at their first interview, so he continued, and his stately kindness never bore a tinge of condescension.

With each passing day the governess grew less sad, but the color did not return to her face, and in her eyes still lingered that strange hunted look which was so out of place on her face.

Only once had she been outside the casa, and then she had merely been lured a short distance by Inez, and only after considerable coaxing.

This aversion to the outer air surprised the donna, but had she also known that at sound of each hoof-ring in the court Miss Lingard was filled with trembling, she would have wondered more and more.

One of Don Ramon's neighbors, as we have seen, was Colonel James Barstow, and when, about two weeks after the arrival of the governess, the officer called at Casa Victoria, the don was not at all surprised.

Over their wine they talked in a friendly fashion, but Barstow had come on business and he finally arrived at the point of breaking it gently.

"I have been wondering, my dear Don Ramon," he blandly said, "why you are dooming yourself to a life of loneliness at your age. You have been for several years a widower, and you would now be very excusable if you took to yourself a second wife. Your nature is so homelike that you ought not to go on alone."

The colonel believed he had made a very good beginning, but he had really done wretchedly. Don Ramon had always been in the habit of managing his own affairs, and he fully intended to do so to the end of time, while, so far as Barstow was concerned, he had never liked him, despite the fact that he was an American.

"Thank you," he somewhat coldly answered, "but I prefer not to discuss the matter."

"No? Why, I thought—Do you believe in man living alone?" awkwardly asked Barstow.

"It is every man for himself, colonel, but you must remember that I, unlike yourself, have some one to care for my home in my daughter, Inez."

"But, Don Ramon, she will some day leave you; she will go to a home of her own, you know."

"She will go with my blessing," the Spaniard said with a sort of tender dignity.

"I envy the happy man," sighed Barstow, his elaborately-planned course all thrown to chaos by his companion's failure to talk as he had been expected.

"He will indeed be fortunate, for my daughter is worthy of the proudest noble of old Spain."

"I believe you, Don Ramon; you are quite right. This idea has long been in my mind, and it has given me a good deal of uneasiness—"

"Of uneasiness—"

"Pardon me, Don Ramon; let me finish. Let me say that I have been as observing as yourself, that I have seen all these numerous charms of Donna Inez—her beauty, intelligence and goodness, and the thought that you might intend her for some Spanish noble has been the one thing that has prevented me from coming to you and saying, 'I love your daughter, Don Ramon; I would make her my wife!'"

The words were out at last, and with a feverish feeling new to him, the colonel awaited the reply. In one respect he had spoken falsely; he knew that it was the pet idea of Don Ramon to see Inez the wife of some rich and prominent American, rather than of a Spaniard.

Victoria was taken by surprise. His neighbor was a man far older than Inez, and his nature was undemonstrative, even cold; he had never dreamed of this state of affairs.

Still, he was not a man to lose his composure, and after a brief pause, during which many

thoughts went flashing through his mind, he made an answer which was both shrewd and dignified.

"Your words give me pleasure, Colonel Barstow, for they bear testimony to my daughter's worth, and when her education has been completed, and she becomes of marriageable age, I trust that you will not find her less charming. As I have told you, she will devote the next two years to gaining a thorough knowledge of American ways in polite society. When she returns, we may both be married, but if she returns pledged to some Eastern statesman, we shall see our views fulfilled."

Was it a rebuff, or not? Barstow believed it to be one, but he was not to be easily discouraged.

"Pardon me, but I believe I might help you. I have seen ten years of life at Washington, and if I might accompany Donna Inez, I could forward her interests at all points, and even make her a welcome guest at the White House, where I have influence. To do all this, I must necessarily be her selected husband, and I hereby make a formal request for her hand."

Without showing surprise, Don Ramon bowed deeply.

"You do me honor, colonel, but you forget that Donna Inez is a mere girl."

"Nearly twenty, I believe, Don Ramon, and among your people, girls are often mothers at fifteen."

My daughter is an *Americana*, and your wisest men say that a young lady should never marry under twenty. Be that as it may, I am resolved that if three-score suitors come to my door, Inez shall not marry until after her Washington career, during which time she must remain entirely free. I speak frankly to you because you are a neighbor, and, when thanking you sincerely for your kindness, must ask you if my way is not the wiser one."

Barstow was a man who could hold most doggedly to a purpose once formed, but he was also a man of considerable discernment, and he knew that he might as well try to crush a rock with his fist as to move Don Ramon.

"There is wisdom in what you say," he blandly answered, "and I bow to your wishes."

Outwardly, he did, and, skillfully changing the subject, he spoke no more of Inez.

Inwardly, he was filled with rage, and to himself he swore that the Spaniard should yet be humbled and Donna Inez forced to accept him as a husband.

On his own part, Victoria was glad that his fixed plans for the future gave him a chance to so plausibly say no to the colonel. He did not like the man, and under no condition would he have been willing that he should marry Inez.

Somewhat later, after bidding the don *hasta manana*, Barstow encountered Miss Lingard near the top of the stairs which led down to the patio. Her face was new to him, but in the momentary glance vouchsafed him, he saw nothing very attractive, from his point of view, and he nearly forgot her as he went on toward his own house.

The governess, however, had grown paler than ever at the meeting, and though she went straight to her own apartment, she walked with a strangely unsteady step.

Once free from view her last atom of composure vanished, and with a deep sigh she sunk to the floor, and lay white, motionless, and unconscious.

What had she seen in the face of Colonel Barstow which so terrified her?

Half an hour later, when Inez Victoria entered the room she found her sitting in a chair, but her look was so ghostly that the warm-hearted donna uttered a little cry.

"Holy Virgin!" she exclaimed, "you are ill!"

"No, no," said Miss Lingard, wearily, "it is nothing."

"But you are pale as a specter."

"I—I slipped and fell; but I am better now. Do not be alarmed, my dear; I shall be well presently."

The governess forced a smile to her lips, and her companion accepted the explanation without a doubt. She bestowed such attentions as she could, and in a short time Miss Lingard seemed as well as ever. She even laughed, in her low, sweet way, when Inez jested, but in her gray eyes there was a shadow deeper than usual, and at the least pause in the conversation a far away look passed over her face.

Inez did not have a suspicion that her late pallor arose from anything more than physical illness. Had any one hinted that Miss Lingard had a secret, the donna would have laughed at the idea. The governess had been but two weeks at Nuevo Madrid, and had made no acquaintances outside Casa Victoria, while her face was not that of a woman with a secret.

Thus would Inez have reasoned, but there was no one to suggest a suspicion, and Miss Lingard went unquestioned.

Leaving her, soon after, Inez went to her room. Then from her pocket she took a slip of paper, and read the words written thereon:

"INEZ:—I wish to see you in the orange-grove to-night, at nine o'clock. I beg that you will not disappoint me, for it is a matter of great importance. Shall I see you?"

EDUARDO."

Such was the note, and that it did not please Donna Inez was shown by the fact that though it was her third time of reading, she frowned slightly.

"I will be there, as he wishes," she said; "but this interview must be the last. I will no longer go and come, nor play the hypocrite at his bidding."

And with these two chapters devoted to a glance at the past, we bring our story in full to that evening when Long-Haired Max had his series of adventures between Barstow's residence and the hotel.

CHAPTER IX.

NAPOLEON JONES.

WHEN Long-Haired Max entered the hotel, after leaving Buck Eagan, he found Tim Foley anxiously awaiting him. His prolonged absence had caused the faithful fellow a good deal of uneasiness, but his return set him to talking volubly.

"Bedad," he said, "I'm thinking it's meself has stumbled on a saycret while setting here. Phat do yez s'pose I heerd?"

"Tell me."

"It's 'asilly towld, but not so 'asy to understand. I can't make bid nor tail out av it. In plain English, two Gr'asers came in a bit ago, an' ordered whisky to drink. Dhey was talking while dhey poured the stuff down, an' I heerd dhem say dhat they was to go to some orange-grove an' st'ale a girrul."

"To night?" demanded Max, quickly.

"No," said Tim, deliberately. "It couldn't have been to-night, fur dhey said at noine o'clock, an' it is already tin."

"True. Well, when was it?"

"Divil a bit can I till. Dhey called no names, nayther av days or payple, so it's meself knows only that a girrul is to be stolen."

"Did you know those men?"

"No, but I'd know dhem ag'in. Waunce let me get me eyes on dhem ag'in, an' I can till thim, so if you want to folly dhe thrail, why, it's Tim Foley is in wid you."

"We will look for them to-morrow."

They did as he said, but the day passed without a sight at the strangers, and when darkness fell no new discoveries had been made.

The same statement will apply to the cavalier's affair with Colonel Barstow. No word came from that individual, Buck Eagan did not reappear, and there seemed to be a hush in events; but Long-Haired Max was too wise to think he had been forgotten.

Knowing the colonel as he did, he felt sure that some snare had already been laid for his unwary feet, and that if he came out of the battle safely he must look well to himself.

The possibility that he might be attacked through the law on some false charge, led him, after due deliberation, to the office of the mayor, whom he believed to be an honest man.

His honor was in—a tall, angular, loose-jointed, homely man, who looked as though he had originally sprung from the "poor white" class of the South; but, though he was very proud of the fact that he had been an upholder of the Texan cause in the days of the republic, he never went back of that period in his history.

He was alone in his office, and evidently in good-humor.

"How de do, stranger, how de do? Glad ter see ye, fur I was pinin' fur company. Tote a cheer over hyar an' sot yourself on it. Will ye hev a chaw?"

His honor was certainly not a man of the hard-to-approach species. Max was favorably impressed by his good-natured face and bluff manners, and the chair was quickly occupied.

"I don't chew," he said, "but I have good tobacco in my pocket, and I shall be glad to smoke it with you."

"Et are ag'in' my precepts ter smoke or chaw another man's terbacco in an officious capacity, being as how I am alcalde an' mayor o' this port; but all rules have axceptions, an' I don't keer of I do indulge. Thank ye!"

His honor cut off the tobacco with a knife which was plainly no stranger to the weed, and while he cut he also talked.

"You kerry Greaser clo's on yer back, but I kin tell at first glance that you're as white as I be. What's ther name you kerry?"

"Max Baldwin is my true one, but somehow folks have fallen into the habit of calling me Long-Haired Max."

"Better that than Mexican Max; I hate a Greaser. I say, kin you play poker?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then you're my tarant'ler. I'm jest famishin' ter wrastle some man over ther keerds. When I've got my pipe a goin', we kin hear your biz, ef you've got any, an' then we'll play poker till ther cows come home. Ef my selery hyar wasn't so small, I'd hire a man ter play poker, an' I r'ally think any one in sech an officious capacity as mine should be 'lowed a poker-player by ther town. Hyer, hows'ever, folks are rayth'r impeculiarous, an' no luxuries goes with ther office. That thar sign is one o' my own painting."

He pointed to a large pasteboard card, evidently once the cover of a box, which hung on

the wall. On its face, in letters so irregular as to remind one of stragglers after a battle, were marked these words:

"THE BOODWAH O' JUSTICE!"

NAPOLEON JONES,

Alcalde and Mayor!"

His honor contemplated the sign with a beaming face, and then turned to Max.

"How does that thar strike you?" he asked.

"Very favorably. It shows a good many excellent points, but I am particularly impressed by the first line—the boudoir of justice! The idea is very good, and should be studied by Eastern men."

"Them!" said the alcalde, snapping his fingers. "Woof! ther boodwahs o' jestic are slaughter-houses o' truth! I've see'd 'em, an' I read about them ev'ry week. Did any man ever know Napoleon Jones ter run away with other folks's money? Nol by ther howlin' Pompey, nol! What I handle in an officious capacity, an' in this boodwah o' jestic partic'lar, is as safet as you be."

The conversation had reached just the point where Max desired it, and he was not long in coming to business.

"You have a citizen here named Colonel Barstow," he said.

Watching closely, Max saw his honor's lower jaw droop.

"Yas, we has him," he admitted.

"He is a rich man."

"I ain't said he ain't."

"Would it be safe to make a charge against him?"

Up came the jaw, and the alcalde's face and eyes brightened wonderfully.

"Jest show me ther two-legged critter that has a complaint ter make," he cried, energetically.

"I'm the man!"

"You?"

"I."

His honor appeared like a small tornado just then. He had partially arisen from his seat, his face beaming with joy, and at the last word he seized his visitor's hand with one of his own, while with the other he began to play a tune on his back as though he had a drum under his hand.

"By ther Eternal! you fill me full up with rapture!" he declared. "Ther steam is on fifty pounds above ther record, an' ther paddle-wheel goes round like Mexican whisky. You're my brother from this proximo. Would it be safet ter make a charge? Wal, jest you show me ther evidunce an' ax me arterwards. I know he is guilty, an' I'll hang him ef I kin hire anybody ter do ther lynchin', but I must hear ther evidunce officiously."

Nearly deprived of breath by the too-vigorous blows on his back, Max managed to bear all with stoicism. Already he had "sized" his honor well, and he was glad he had come. Not only was he a diamond in the rough, but it seemed that he did not like Barstow.

His remarks about lynching seemed a little out of place in the "boudoir of justice," but, like many other public men, Napoleon Jones believed that justice was created for his friends.

Having succeeded in getting his honor into the chair again, Long-Haired Max went ahead with his story, telling it as he had done to Barstow; but there were many breaks in the narrative, for at every telling place Jones came out of his seat like a jumping-jack. He pounded his visitor on the back with renewed vigor, executed several dances, and twice kicked over his chair in his exuberant joy, but the story was told at last.

At this crisis another man entered the office, but the alcalde flew at him, and, despite his remonstrances, flung him into the street.

"Jestic allows no interruptions this proximo," he said, returning to Max. "This hyar is a case o' magnitood, an' I'll be durned ef it don't choke me all up with tickle. Pard, ther colonel swings from one o' his own trees ter-morrer mornin'!"

"No, no," began Max; but he was interrupted.

"But I say yes, an' I'm alcalde o' this hyar town. What I say in an officious capacity is thar ter stay."

"But, see here, I want to go about the matter legally, so that there may be no stumble arterward."

Long-Haired Max was really worried, but he did not know Napoleon Jones so well as he thought. With that good man justice was not a myth, and though he might talk ridiculously, he never acted too hastily to be just.

He cooled down after a while, and when Max stated that his principal witness, the man who saw Barstow murder the elder Baldwin, was in Chili, ill with fever, and would not reach California for a week or two, the alcalde agreed to maintain a strict silence.

"Whenever you give me ther wink I'll drap on him an' tote him ter jail," he added. "He's escaped jestic fur sev'ral year, but he'll find his latter end in this boodwah. He will be able ter say with ther poet:

"Ther mills o' ther gods grind slowly;
But they chaw things up durned fine."

"Well, Mr. Mayor, I am very much obliged for your sympathy and advice—"

"Hold on thar; ther circus ain't begun yet. You've only see'd ther handbills this proximo; wait till you see me in an officious capacity; wait till Barstow is in my boodwah o' jestic with strings on his hands an' feet, an' then durned my butes ef you don't see ther hull menag'ry, from ther elefant down ter ther smallest flea. They'll all be thar. But hold on a bit!"

CHAPTER X.

IN THE ORANGE GROVE.

MR. JONES abruptly arose, produced a black bottle from a closet, and poured out some mellow whisky for his guest. This done, Max proceeded to satisfy a suspicion which was in his mind.

"I'm glad the colonel is not a personal friend of yours," he said.

"Friend!" echoed the alcalde. "Him my friend? Howlin' Pompey! I wouldn't eat off'm ther same plate with him. Why, I've b'en almost as much wronged by him as you hev—mind, I say almost."

"Indeed! What has he done?"

"I'll tell yer. Wal, ye see I'm servin' my fo'th term hyar, an' I nat'rally feel that ther office b'longs ter me an' me ter ther office. I tuk ther ribbons when Uncle Sam borrowed ther sile from Mexiker, an' I reckon I'll hole on. Don't you think that arter admixin' jestic in this boodwah fur all this time it should be peter—peter—perpetuallusly?"

"Beyond a doubt," said Max, gravely.

"Beyond a doubt et will be!" declared his honor, nearly splintering the table under his iron fist. "I'm hyarter stay, an' that's what I tote Barstow when I heerd he was 'lectioneerin' ag'in' me. He talked about democratic doctrine an' Jeffersonian principles—though ther Lord only knows what he meant; I didn't; but when he said I ought ter give some other man a chance at office, I ketched his meanin' right away. He talked plain then, an' so did I. Says I ter him: 'Ain't I gi'n 'em a chance ter be sheriff, an' deputy-sheriff, an' assistant-deputy? I's did all this,' says I, 'but my magnititude won't go any furdur. Ther alcaldeship is mine, an' I'll hang on till Gabriel totes me across ther river.'"

His honor paused for breath.

"That was fair," said Max. "What did he say?"

"Says he, 'Ther office is ther people's—you don't own it.' Says I—an' I raised my right hand solemnly—'It are the boodwah o' jestic.'"

"You had him there," said Max.

"So I did, an' he left me. But what d'ye s'pose he did? Durn his butes! he began ter malign me in an officious capacity. I kin prove by witnesses that he called me an ignoramus, an' insinuated that my educational advantages had been so neglected when I was a young man that I wasn't capable o' ordainin' the functionaries o' this hyar office. Young man, kin you see one weak p'int in me as an alcalde?—kin you see whar'in I fail to use enough big words?"

Napoleon Jones paused for a verdict. He had long since arisen, and he had flung his arms about in wild gestures while pouring out his long words, and now, with one arm akimbo and the other stretched out like a pump-handle, he awaited an answer.

"There is no failure. You are as much at home with the English language as in your boudoir of justice. Already I suspect that Barstow was himself the candidate he wished to push against you."

"Right you be, young feller, every time. He was the durnation critter, an' he did et, too. What war the result? Wal, yer see me still in the boodwah, an' I need only add that ther vote was ninety-eight ag'in' ten. I could have made my majority bigger, but thar was only a hundred and eight legal voters, an' as ther ten who voted fur ther colonel was his own hired men, I know'd it would sca'cely do to throw them out."

Light was thus thrown on another election mystery, but Long-Haired Max, thinking how small would be his own chances if Barstow was mayor of Nuevo Madrid instead of Napoleon Jones, did not fail to applaud heartily.

Soon after, he returned to his hotel, where his good-humor surprised Tim Foley; but Max felt very much stronger since seeing Alcalde Jones. With such a friend, he felt sure that the colonel's money would be overbalanced.

As night approached, the cavalier thought of the plot he had heard under the mission wall, and resolved to go that evening, before nine, to Don Ramon's orange-grove.

He might be wholly at fault, but it was worth trying.

Accordingly, he left the hotel at the proper time and, accompanied by Tim, started for the orange-grove of Don Ramon's ranch.

Thus far, the Irishman had offered few views, but as they stepped upon Victoria's possessions, his wits became quickened.

"Dhe ould Spaniard has a girrul, hasn't he?" he asked.

"So I hear."

"Have yez iver seen her?"

"No."

"Will, be jabbers, it's mesilf has dhe idea we will have dhe chance dhis noight. Phat a lift it will be fur us if we can get dhe ould man on our side."

"Why so?—do you want to marry his daughter?"

"Divil a marry. It's not mesilf dhat's so foolish, but fri'nds in a s'trange place are not to be despised."

Long-Haired Max did not answer, and the orange-grove was soon reached. No one being visible, they lay flat on the grass and waited.

Only a few minutes had passed when another man appeared on the scene. He first looked about the grove and then surveyed Casa Victoria, after which he began pacing to and fro.

Again the night was dark, but Max believed he recognized the man as the same one he had seen at the old mission, and when he saw a woman advancing from the *casa* he no longer felt a doubt as to the result.

Here were the chief actors in the drama, but where were the allies of the man? He looked about, but if they were on the ground, they were not visible.

Nearer came the woman; she reached the grove, and was met by the man only a few yards from where our friends lay.

The meeting was not a tender one on the part of the woman, for though she gave her hand, it was with evident coldness. Max was at once impressed by the belief that she had come to the spot against her own desires—possibly led on by fear, for if she was a Mexican girl, it would not be at all strange if she had a secret to conceal.

Who and what was she? The cavalier, who had keen eyes, used them to the best of his ability, but the *rebosa* which was wrapped closely around her face was enough to baffle Max. Her form, however, was more like that of a maiden than a matron, and in his mind he was wondering if Tim's theory was correct.

Surely, the movements of this girl were too graceful for those of a servant—was it Donna Inez?

His attention was more practically directed as the conversation between the two grew warmer. The man seemed to threaten and the girl to beg for mercy. What secret did he hold over her life?

Long-Haired Max had become so interested that he had eyes only for them, but a touch from Tim aroused him again. The Irishman pointed, and then the cavalier saw two men just behind the girl. They crept forward like cats, and there could be no doubt as to their object.

"Lave us go to the riscue," said Tim, eagerly.

"Wait!" advised Max.

There was a sudden spring and a struggle. Both of the men had leaped forward, and while one seized the girl the other attacked her companion. The two seemed to have a desperate struggle. Blows were exchanged and curses uttered, and then he who had met the girl went down in a heap.

So far all had been as Max had heard it planned at the old mission, but he thought it time for a change in the programme. Springing forward, closely followed by Tim, he attacked the surprised and dismayed ruffians.

The second fight was shorter than the first, and almost before the rescuers realized it, they had their opponents on the ground under their knees.

In the meanwhile the girl had kept her place, showing no emotion whatever, but she came forward quickly when the struggle was over.

"Held them fast, senor; do not let them escape!" she said.

"Do you know them, senorita?" Max asked.

The girl bent over the captives.

"I think I have seen them in the village," she replied, after a little hesitation.

"I reckon Alcalde Jones will care for them," the cavalier added.

The girl turned away with a quickness which indicated that she had suddenly remembered the man who had met her, and who had been stricken down at the first of the fight, and, as though by instinct, each one of the four men looked with her.

Man number five had disappeared.

One of the prisoners at once set up a howl.

"Oh, the coward! the knave!" he cried; "he has deserted us!"

"Why did you serve such a monster?" Max asked.

"Ah! he promised us gold, and we swallowed the bait. *Carajo!* I will kill him!"

"What?" said the girl, sharply. "Do you say that he offered you gold? For what?—to strike him to the ground?"

"Ah! ah! fools that we are, that was but a farce! We were to steal you, and he was to be the rescuer and bring you back. It was all planned in advance. *Mil demonios!* I believe it was a trap for us, and if not, he was a coward and run away when there was danger."

The girl pressed her hand to her breast and seemed strangely moved.

"I can not believe it! I will not!" she said.

"If proof is wanted," said Long-Haired Max,

"I am here. Had I not overheard the runaway hire one of these men, you would at this moment be a prisoner."

CHAPTER XI.

THE PROWLERS OF THE NIGHT.

THE girl turned sharply toward the cavalier. It was as though she was angry at the accusation, and reluctant to believe, but whatever were her feelings, she evidently saw where lay the weight of evidence and stood convinced.

"Let me tie these fellows and then I will tell my story in full," continued Long-Haired Max.

"Tie them? No, no; let them go!" she exclaimed.

"Let them go?"

"Yes."

"What! after this assault?"

"Again I say yes—more than that, I command you; let them go!"

For one moment the cavalier hesitated.

"This is your affair, senorita," he then said, "and all shall be as you say. If 'twas my business they should pay for their villainy, but as 'tis, away they go. Let him up, Tim!"

Max had already arisen, and as the Irishman reluctantly followed his example, the men took to their heels and dashed out of sight at full speed, evidently fearing that such a forgiving spirit could not be long-lived.

Long-Haired Max looked at the girl for fresh directions, but she had fallen into deep thought and seemed oblivious of their presence. Her manner was not encouraging for further advances, but he would not think of leaving her where her enemies could at any time return and seize her.

"Pardon me, senorita," he said, removing his hat, "but can we be of further service to you?" She started from her thoughtful mood.

"No," she answered. "You have already done much more, I fear, than I can easily repay. If, however, the sincere gratitude of a woman amounts to anything, it may please you to know that I thank you warmly, sincerely."

"I ask for no more, and to an honest man there can be no greater reward," Max said, earnestly. "I am a man of the world, but I still hold it above all other pleasures to help those but for whom this world would speedily fall from grace."

The girl looked at him in surprise, in actual interest. Courted and admired for her wealth, she had heard many empty speeches in her day, but such a one as this, uttered with sincerity, pleased her feminine nature.

Free from personal flattery, it was a manly tribute to her sex.

"I owe you much, senor, and if you are a resident of Nuevo Madrid, you will be a welcome guest at yonder house. It is the residence of Don Ramon Victoria, and I am his daughter, Inez."

Long-Haired Max gave his own name; and then, at her request, told the story of his connection with the late adventure. Something in the perfidious course of the man she had met caused her emotion, but he could not tell whether it was sorrow or something else.

"I have one favor to ask of you," she said, when he had finished. "May I ask you to keep this night's events a profound secret? It is my wish that not a person beyond those now here should know of it. The other men, of course, will be silent. Have I your promises?"

Max was not surprised, after what had gone before, but though he promised promptly, it was with reluctance.

Tim was even more dissatisfied, and he began grumbling audibly, but, before Max could speak, Inez laid her hand on his arm and he was conquered.

Finding that the girl was not disposed to share her secret with them, they merely conducted her to a safe point, and then, after watching her disappear within the *casa*, turned away from the grounds.

"Bedad! an' it's an illigant crayther she is," said Tim, his tongue growing loose as soon as it was safe. "Dher's where you get dher r'ale Spanish senoritas, an' she is as foine as dhey make thim. Howly Pater! wid her broight eyes upon me day an' noight, me heart w'd be smashed into bits widout doubt."

"She is of a rich and proud family."

"Oh! begorra, I know dhat same. It's not Tim Foley as w'd be thinking of dhe loikes av her, but I can admire at a distance, yez see."

"I don't understand this affair."

"She moight till if she w'd."

"She will not; she has a secret to conceal. What is it? She looked too good and pure for one to— But, bah! I am a fool. What is she to me? What is her secret to me?"

"Don't ye worry about dhe gurrul. She's a cl'an-reptter from dhe wourrud go, I take it. Dhe reptoile she met was her lover, but she found out before dhat he was a villain an' dhat's why dhey quarreled. Now, I'm thinking she's off wid dhe ould love to stay."

Tim looked slyly at his companion, but Max did not answer. He had fallen into a thoughtful mood, and in silence they walked on for some time. Unknown to the cavalier, they passed

the village, but he was soon aroused by a grasp at his arm.

"Howly Pater! do yez see that?" the Irishman demanded.

"What do you mean?"

Tim was pointing off toward the ocean, and there, as though resting on the water, they saw a pair of lights side by side, one red, the other green.

"By Judas! the schooner again!" Max exclaimed.

"I should remarruk dhat it is. At iny rate, dhe loights are dhe same we saw dhe ither noight, an' I reckon dhe same game is going on."

The cavalier directed his gaze toward the cliff, on which they had before seen the responsive light, but it was not visible from where they stood.

"Tim, I want to know what this business means. Are you with me?"

"Ivery toime. L'ade on an' see!" was the brief reply.

The answer pleased the young man and they started toward the cliff on a run. Without discussing the matter, both felt that they would find matters as before, and they meant to know what all this strange signaling meant.

In their race but little heed was given to obstacles, and though they had several stumbles, twenty minutes of running took them near the cliff.

The light was still invisible, but that was not at all strange for, of course, too many precautions could not be taken in a work which called for any degree of care, and the men of the cliff would be fools to display their beacon-light where it could be seen from the village.

Caution soon became more necessary than haste, and they crept up the cliff in a catlike fashion.

At last they stood near the top, but when a view of the broad, rocky top was gained, no light at all was there visible, nor was a human being to be seen.

Looking out at sea, the twin colors were visible as before, however.

Long-Haired Max was disappointed, but, convinced that if there were really men about the place they were in hiding and, consequently, dangerous, he resolved to try another plan.

Without venturing to utter a word he drew Tim back several feet.

"Our game is not here, but we may find them at the base of the cliff. Let us descend."

"Beggorra, I wish we had our boat."

The idea struck the cavalier forcibly, and he was sorry that he had not secured the boat at the first. It still lay concealed where they had placed it after escaping from the Water Witch and through its help they might at least go out to the signaling vessel and make sure whether it was the schooner or some other craft.

Acting on this idea, he asked Tim to hasten up the shore and row the boat down, and then, when once more alone, he continued his way toward the little inlet from which the strange boat had put out on the other occasion.

This time, however, there was no sign of them. The water lay placidly before him, and not a sound arose to tell that a human being beside himself was near. He made a circuit of the place, but failed to find any boat.

Considerably perplexed, he finally sought a spot where he could see Tim when he came down and settled into a watchful stillness.

Out on the bosom of the ocean, beyond the outer bar, the twin lights still burned side by side. What did it mean? All this caution meant that there was a secret to hide, and one of crime as well as of mystery.

So much was clear, but further than that he could not go. He had read of such signaling in connection with the smugglers, pirates and slavers of olden times, but there was no reason why any one of these three classes should exist near Nuevo Madrid, while a continuous questioning of the village people had failed to unearth a case of outlawry.

Plainly, the honest people of the vicinity knew nothing of the work carried on under their very eyes—who, then, were these mysterious brethren of the coast and what their purpose? The minutes slipped away but brought no change in the situation. Out on the water still burned the twin lights, but that on the cliff did not reappear.

The pause was broken by the arrival of Tim Foley. He came down near the shore, rowing with his peculiarly noiseless stroke, and Long-haired Max was soon aboard.

"Anything new?"

"Divil a bit."

"Then pull for the double light. By Judas! I am going to look into this matter, if possible."

"I'm wid you, me darlint, an' we'll expose 'em entiorely. Pull on, is it? Beggorra, we fly!"

The Irishman bent to his oars, and, though he dipped the blades with great care, his hardened muscles sent the boat forward like a fish.

Long-haired Max, with a revolver held ready for use, kept up an unceasing watch. He expected to meet some boat on the way, and in case of such an encounter, there might be hot work.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE BLACK BRETHREN.

MINUTE after minute passed without a sight of a boat other than their own, and Long-haired Max and his friend drew nearer to the mysterious vessel. The twin lights remained as before, but all along the coast darkness reigned supreme.

The light did not appear on the cliff.

As they neared the vessel, Tim Foley redoubled his caution and the water scarcely rippled beneath his oars. Silently as a phantom they drew nearer yet to the two lights, and the form of the vessel began to be visible.

Tim, looking over his shoulder, detected her points quicker than Max.

"She's a top-s'l schooner," he whispered, "an', bedad, I bel'ave it is dhe Water Witch. Hould aisy, a bit, an' we'll come up to her nose an' r'ade dhe legend which shall settle dhe question."

"Go on."

Tim obeyed and they crept close to the schooner, on the deck of which reigned profound silence. Had she been entirely deserted, it could have been no more marked.

The cavalier wondered that his companion did not grow superstitious, but Tim had so well recognized the craft that it was a mere form to look for her name.

This latter fact occurred to Max so forcibly that he directed Tim to cease pulling, for a further advance would be mere folly.

"It's the Water Witch, for sure," Tim whispered.

"Yes. Now, let the boat rest and we will watch the result."

Five minutes passed away, but still no sound arose from the schooner. Except for the twin lights, Max would actually have thought her deserted, and as it was he was growing painfully anxious to board her when the sound of oars off at the east, or toward the coast, heralded a new phase of affairs.

The sound seemed to reach the schooner, too, for Max heard a stir, but in the darkness he could not distinguish any men.

The boat, however, advanced without any attempt at concealment, and the two friends saw that it contained three men.

"Be silent as death!" whispered Max.

"Boat ahoy!"

The hail suddenly arose from the schooner's deck, and the answer was equally prompt.

"Ahoy the schooner!"

"Who are you?"

"The Black Brethren!"

"Come to the nest!"

These most peculiar questions and answers were exchanged with a rapidity which told that they were not extemporaneous, and as the boat did not pause, she had touched the schooner's side at the last word.

Then the men clambered to the deck, the boat was raised, and a well-known voice began to give directions for getting under way.

That voice, which was the same as had answered from the boat, was that of Captain Jabez Peters.

"Snall we go fur thim?" the Irishman eagerly asked.

"Good Heaven! no; what could we do? Let them go, for now."

And so they watched until the schooner's sails were spread, and, catching a slight breeze, she moved away down the coast, leaving our two friends alone on the water.

"Well, begorra, dhat bates my toime entoirely," said Tim. "Phat dhe devil did all dhat mummery mane? Sure, an' dhat was ould Peters in dhe boat, an' phy should he talk like an idyot whin boarding his own schooner? What did he say?—dhat he was a Black Brithrin an' dhe other spalpeen—it was Dowd, I'm thinking—towld him to 'Come to the nist!' Howly Pater! an' whin did a first-class sayman git to call a schooner a nist?"

"Pull for the shore and we will talk as we go. The words you criticize did certainly sound very foolish, but you see each one had a meaning. They were the secret words of the gang we have got wind of, though who and what compose that gang I don't know."

"But, sure, I niver thought ould Paters would talk so foolish, an' he an ould sayman."

Long-Haired Max smiled at Tim's distress.

"The objectionable words were not formed by Jabez Peters. As you say, he would not think of referring to his schooner as a 'nest,' nor would he talk about 'Black Brethren.' All this goes to show that he has an ally, and a man more educated than he. This ally I believe to be a resident of Nuevo Madrid. Now, who is he?"

It was a question they discussed all the way to the shore, but one not so easily answered. In fact, though well aware that some scheme was afoot, they could not gain any clew to its nature.

Shrewd, money-loving Jabez Peters would not fool away his time on an enterprise that did not pay him well, but, in the name of the wonderful, what was there on that barren coast to pay him for his time and labor—more, to support and satisfy his whole crew, with an unknown number of allies?

When they touched the shore Max threw off his

vain mental labor, they concealed the boat once more, and then took their way toward the village. They would have gone at once to the hotel, but when they reached the front of Alcalde Jones's office they saw that magnate inside, so Max concluded to stop and see him, while Tim went on alone.

The worthy mayor seemed to be excited about something. He had thrown off his coat and was striding about the room in his shirt-sleeves, his pipe in full blast, while on the table sat a suspicious-looking black bottle.

He hailed Max with a beaming face.

"Durnation, old man, come in!" he cried. "I'm right glad ter see you, fur I r'ally need somebody ter give me moral backbone. Squat right thar, drink yer fill an' set ther old pipe a-blazin'."

"Has anything gone wrong, alcalde?"

"Has thar? Wal, thar ain't nothin' gone right as I knows on. Durnation! ther times are out o' j'int, an' ef it wasn't fur ther sweet consolation o' ther boodwah o' justice, I should be ready ter toss up ther sponge."

"You have my sympathy, and if you'll come right down to business I'll try to help you."

"Business? Wal, I reckon business will be boomin' hyar, right soon. Before a week o' proximos have passed I'll have this boodwah chock full o' cases; I'll ram them inter ther docket like buck-shot inter a gun!"

"I take it you are going to arrest somebody."

"You kin bet your butes on thet, young feller; I am!"

"Who is the party?"

"Gho-ts!"

"Ghosts?"

"Yes, that's what I said, an' I'll do it. Now, you are a stranger in this hyar town, an' prob'ly don't know that ther ruined mission over thar is ha'nted. Sech, hows'ever, is ther fact, an' ther speerits are gettin' too free-and-easy ter suit."

"Tell me all about it," said Max.

The alcalde obeyed, and described a scene exactly like what the cavalier had himself seen; he told of the lone woman on the broken wall, of the monk and of the assassination, and by the time he was through he had worked himself up to a fever pitch.

"I'll arrest them!" he shouted; "I'll tote ev'ry durned one inter this boodwah o' justice, an' give 'em ther rope's-end o' ther law. No sech newfawious work kin occur in ther jurisprudence o' this criminal court while Napoleon Jones sets on ther bench in an officious capacity."

"But can you arrest a ghost?"

"Jest as legally as I kin you or any other man. Durnation! a ghost is no better than any other man!"

"Would you put irons on them?" Max gravely asked.

"I'd load 'em with chains; I'd put them on ther rack, an' t'ar them limb from leg."

"Still, I don't clearly see how you can do it. A specter, if there is such a thing, is but a thing of air—or some other misty material."

His honor stopped short in his excited walk.

"Durnation! I didn't think of that air p'int!" he said, his countenance falling perceptibly.

And, oddly enough, he had not thought of it. He was an unwavering believer in spectral visitors. Max nearly made him angry by trying to convince him there were no such things—and he told the whole story, so far as it was publicly known, of the specters of the old mission.

At the time when the place was occupied, a young girl of Nuevo Madrid suddenly disappeared, and her fate remained a mystery until a half-witted fellow of the village declared that he had seen her murdered by the mission wall by one of the monks; and from that time the ghosts of the two had haunted the spot exactly as Long-Haired Max had seen them.

The alcalde added parenthetically, that ten years after the mysterious disappearance, a woman came to the village who claimed to be the long-missing girl, but as she was thin, pale, and ragged, all knew she was an impostor.

"Was she the only one who had changed in ten years?" Max asked, smiling.

"Oh! you needn't argue that 'twar her, fur ef she was still alive, why should her ghost haunt ther old mission?"

Those who have tried to argue with a superstitious person must know the folly of it, and Max wasted little time on the alcalde.

He told him what he knew about the Water Witch, however, and the worthy man raved long and loud that any one should dare to commit such outrages in his "jurisprudence." He swore to hunt them down, and it was only after a good deal of persuasion that Max won his promise to go slow and try to catch them napping.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A SERIOUS CHARGE.

Two days passed peacefully at Nuevo Madrid. They were not days of inaction to at least three of our characters—Long-Haired Max, Tim Foley and Alcalde Jones were busy.

While awaiting the expiration of the time he had given Colonel Barstow to come to a decision in regard to the matter between them, the cav-

alier devoted a good deal of his time to an attempt to learn who and what were the Black Brethren of the coast. In this work he had the aid of the other two men, and every evening they looked for the beacon lights, but their watch was in vain.

Nothing suspicious occurred, and the few sails that went past during the day were pronounced by Tim Foley to be other than the Water Witch.

Alcalde Jones had grown very much interested in the matter; to use his own expression, "ther more 'e thunked about it, ther madder he got ter think that sech things could occur in his jewresprudence."

Yet, all their efforts went for nothing; from some cause or other, the Black League was "lying low."

Long-Haired Max also devoted some attention to the ghosts of the old mission, and with equally poor success. He was puzzled to know the object of these spectral manifestations. No one around Nuevo Madrid seemed inclined to act the practical joker, and no other object occurred to those interested. The old ruin was not habitable for a human being, so there seemed no object in scaring off people in general.

As to Colonel Barstow he sent no word whatever to Long-Haired Max, nor did they meet anywhere, so the latter was somewhat puzzled to know just what the colonel intended to do.

Twice, he believed he had narrowly escaped traps set for him by Barstow, but as law-breakers were numerous around the Pacific coast, the traps might have been laid by some one else.

At any rate, they caught nothing.

One evening Long-Haired Max was out alone without any particular object in view, but, as had often before been the case, he took his way to the north of the town and sauntered along the road which bordered the ranches of Don Ramon and Colonel Barstow. Since the meeting with Inez in the orange-grove he had not seen her, but his thoughts had often gone to Casa Victoria.

In fact, he had been more impressed than he would have cared to acknowledge, and he regretted that his adventure had not been the means of giving him entrance to the house.

Deep in thought, he had wandered on until near the ruined mission when he was aroused by new and unexpected sounds.

From up the road, a sound rolled toward him which he was not slow to understand. It was that of hoof-strokes from horses' feet, and in such numbers as to surprise him. Where everyone rides horseback, the sight of a single horseman is a common spectacle and several together no novelty, but in this case he was sure that over a score were in motion.

Pausing, he was endeavoring to distinguish them through the darkness, when suddenly a single person, a man on foot, came flying down the road. His hat was gone from his head and he looked like one who runs for his life, but the sight surprised Max.

He wondered if he was pursued by Indians, but close on the heels of the first thought came the recollection that there were no hostiles in the vicinity.

What could it mean?

The man had come near enough for him to perceive that he wore the dress of a Mexican; but as though he was in turn suddenly seen, the man wheeled and rushed up the hill, moving toward the old mission.

Long-Haired Max watched for only a moment, for at that point the clatter of hoofs grew louder, mingled with the jingling of accouterments, and the horsemen came sweeping forward at a gallop.

For a moment the cavalier was undecided what to do, for there might be danger for even him in that swift rush; but he disdained to flee when he had committed no crime, and he stood firm.

Suddenly a series of shouts arose from the men—cries unquestionably those of white men—and some of them were of an ominous nature.

"There he is!"

"Surrender, you dog!"

"Cut him down, if he tries to escape!"

Long-Haired Max quickly understood that he had been mistaken for the late fugitive, and he saw, too, that these horsemen, as wild as they seemed, were neither Indians nor outlaws; if their dress went for anything, they were United States soldiers.

The fact astonished him, for he had not known that any were near Nuevo Madrid, but it also seemed to do away with all cause for fear.

They had made a natural mistake, but a little explaining would make all clear.

Nevertheless, the way of the riders was not pleasant; and as they reined in their horses, after dashing almost to his side, more than one piece of turf was flung against him.

"Surrender, you black hound!" cried one of the blue-coats; and Max saw that all had their sabers out.

He held up his open hands with the palms toward them, and answered, in a pleasant voice:

"Do I look like fighting?"

"You had better not, for you've piled up enough of the wrath to come already," was the fierce reply. "Make another attempt to run and we will riddle you with bullets."

"I beg your pardon," said Max, still coolly, "but I think you are laboring under a mistake. I am not the man you have been pursuing. He, alarmed at sight of me, has taken to the top of the ridge."

The previous speaker burst into a laugh.

"Wouldn't you like to make me believe that?" he cried, scornfully. "It won't work. Here, men, seize him without delay."

"Again I say to you that I am not the man you take me to be. If you are after a criminal, you are allowing him to escape by this delay. As for me, I am an American. My name is Baldwin; and I can prove an *alibi* up to within half an hour ago."

These remarks had been made while the soldiers, several of whom had dismounted, were rudely grasping him; but he bore it calmly.

"You are wasting breath," said the leader, who wore the uniform of a lieutenant. "We know you well, and we can't be fooled. More than that, you shall tell us the name of your accomplice."

"Permit me to ask who I am?"

"Your name is Eduardo Castro."

"Wrong, lieutenant, wrong."

"Don't you dispute with me!" roared the officer, in a fury. "I'll take the starch out of you! Here, Smith! get out your lasso, and we'll swing him up."

"Don't see no tree right hyar," answered the man addressed.

"What's that to you?" shouted his superior.

"Your place is to obey; mine to command."

The lasso was produced, but the vicious lieutenant then saw that he was indeed wrong. The neck and the noose were at hand, but not the tree.

Then it was that the lieutenant showed his hasty and dangerous nature. Drawing a revolver from his belt, he presented it at the cavalier's head.

"Where is your accomplice?" he thundered.

"Tell me his name, or I swear that I will blow out your brains!"

There was no mistaking the nature of the case. The officer meant just what he said, and for Max to repeat what he had already said would be but to precipitate his fate.

Luckily, however, he did not lose his wits in the emergency:

"He is at the village," he promptly replied.

"I don't believe it!" roared the lieutenant.

"If he could reach there, why couldn't you?"

"There was a horse by the roadside, and the coward seized it and fled, leaving me to my fate," explained the cavalier, throwing considerable passion into his voice.

"Ha! did he, though? Well, I'm not surprised. Rascals are always traitors; and *vice versa*. But, see here! can you lead me to his den?"

"Yes," said Max, grimly thinking of Alcalde Jones.

"And will you?"

"Yes, by the Holy Virgin! I'll pay him for his treachery!" he declared.

"Away we go, then! Here, Thompson! give him a place on your horse."

Max was roughly helped into a saddle—or, rather, in front of one—and away clattered the troop, which was composed of two-score blue-coats.

The cavalier began to lose whatever fear he had felt, for he knew that Napoleon Jones would soon make the rough places smooth and prove his *alibi*; but he was still in the dark as to the cause of the blue-coats' anger.

Who was the man they had pursued and what his crime?

The village was reached in due time, and, under the cavalier's direction, they went at once to the mayor's office. That worthy man was standing in his doorway, and he looked at the troopers in speechless surprise.

"Alcalde," cried Max, at once, "will you tell these men who I am and what you know of my movements this afternoon?"

Mr. Jones found his tongue at once.

"Your name is Max Baldwin an' you've be'n right hyar in this office with me until an hour ago," he replied.

The lieutenant turned white with anger.

"It's false!" he shouted. "This man is Eduardo Castro, a Greaser, and we have chased him ten miles; who are you who dares lie to save him?"

The hot blood of the great official flamed in an instant.

"My name is Napoleon Jones, an' I am ther alcalde an' mayor o' this hyar city!" he thundered. "Durnation wildcats! who be you what calls me a liar? Open yer mouth ter say them words ag'in, an' by ther Eternal I'll commit ye fur contempt o' court. I'll presarve ther dignity o' my office an' arrest any two-legged critter that dar's ter kick up a row in my jewrisprudence!"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SOLDIERS' MISSION.

THE worthy alcalde towered aloft in righteous indignation, and Long-Haired Max felt a thrill

of exultation which was in no way decreased as the pompous lieutenant sprung from his horse and bowed before the great civil officer.

"Are you indeed Mayor Jones?" he asked, in a manner showing that he knew of the man, though he had never met him before.

"Napoleon Jones, alcalde an' mayor," amended that gentleman.

"And do you indeed say that this man is not Eduardo Castro?" he asked.

"I say an' affirm it, an', furdernore, I kin swar ter his presence right hyar as before specified."

The lieutenant's face grew still longer.

"You now see that I told you the truth at the first, sir," said Max. "Your man ran up the hill to, or past the old mission, and while you fooled around me, he made good his escape."

The lieutenant changed color several times in deep mortification. He was a young fellow, of remarkably small stature for one of his calling, and his efforts to grow a beard, to add to his dignity, had only resulted in a few scattering hairs on his upper lip and another line beside his ear which looked like a very weak *abatis*.

Long-Haired Max, with his skill in reading men, at once mentally pronounced him a gentleman not long away from the Jove like walls of the West Point Academy.

"I am Lieutenant Mellough," he said, and his name, as pronounced, with the accent on the last syllable, had quite a musical sound. "I am in pursuit of one Eduardo Castro, charged with an attempt to create an insurrection in California, with a purpose to bring the Territory again under Mexican control. As the military and civil authorities should work together, I call on you for your co-operation in the case."

"Ef ther American eagle is in danger, I'll buckle on my broadsword an' helmit. Incendiary plots can't exist in this jewrisprudence. Jest you ketch the hare, Lieutenant Meller, an' I'll cook him."

"My name is Mellough—the accent is on the last, not the first, syllable."

"Don't stop fur sech trifles. When ther American eagle is screamin' fur help, it don't matter a durn whether you're meller or not. Whar's this Eduardo Castro? Bring him at once ter ther boodwah o' jestice! Never put off till to-morrow what you kin do this proximo."

The alcalde, standing in his doorway and waving his hand majestically, made a somewhat imposing picture, before which the arm of military law wavered, but he did not forget his business.

"I wish to see you alone, sir," he said.

"Walk inter the boodwah o' jestice. Nobody shall be thar except my clerk. He must take notes."

The alcalde waved his hand to Max, and, obeying the hint, the cavalier followed the others, found paper and ink on the table, and prepared to perform the part assigned him.

Lieutenant Mellough, as Max had surmised, was a recent graduate of West Point, and it was Washington influence only which had made him so. By nature effeminate and a dandy, he had been pushed through the Academy by influence. Timid as a youth of straw in his first year, he had been a tyrant and an unmerciful "hazer" in his last. Later, when influence made him a lieutenant of California troopers, he had at first been a most unpromising character; but after a little experience, he managed to conceal his actual timidity, poor judgment and want of general knowledge under a mantle of arrogance, pomp, and ridiculous dignity.

Such was the lieutenant of the troopers.

Once closeted with the alcalde, he explained that a plot was afoot to wrest California from the control of the United States, and then he had been sent to overawe the plotters.

The Eduardo Castro before mentioned was one of the most active of the plotters, though nearly all the Mexican residents were supposed to be implicated.

"Wal," said Mr. Jones, remaining practical throughout the narrative, "all yer kin do is ter wait till ther next proximo, an' then find this hyer Castro. Bring him ter me—bring him ter this boodwah o' j-stice, an' I'll show him that it are durnation resky ter meddle when ther bird o' freedom flops his wings."

"You have one of the most dangerous men right here in Nuevo Madrid," said Mellough.

"We must at once— Hal I have it, I have it!"

The lieutenant's face brightened, and he brought his fist down on the table. The fist was small, and made little disturbance, but its owner was plainly excited and jubilant.

"Durnation wildcats! what hev you got?" the alcalde demanded.

"I'll have Castro yet. Why didn't I think of it before? Ramon Victoria is his uncle, and one of the leading plotters, and I'll bet a month's pay Castro is now concealed there. Here, you clerk, lead the way to Don Ramon's at once."

Mellough had leaped to his feet, but the alcalde put out his hand.

"Hole on, thar; go slow. What'r you gwine ter do?"

"Arrest Don Ramon."

"I reckon ye won't."

"Why not?"

"Because it can't be did without an affidavit, an' you don't get none in this jewrisprudence. Don Ramon is a squar' man from his loot-heels up, an' an upholder o' ther American eagle. I'm ther alcalde an' mayor o' this hyar city, an' I don't give no affidavit."

"Do you mean a warrant?"

"That air is what I said, an' what I mean."

"No warrant is necessary in this case. In case of treason, the military authorities have a right to seize whomsoever they choose."

Napoleon Jones stared blankly at his companion.

"Would you seize this hyar man without my consent?"

"I certainly would."

"Do it," said the alcalde, arising to his full height, "do it, an' by ther Eternal I'll commit you for contempt o' court. Do you think you kin kidnap men out o' this hyar jewrisprudence? No, sir, an' you don't wantter make no insinuations. Remember, sir, you stand in ther boodwah o' jestice!"

The worthy alcalde towered like a giant above his smaller adversary, and there was something really impressive in his attitude, despite his illiterate speech.

Lieutenant Mellough felt the force of his argument, and his pompous manner vanished.

"But—but— See here, Don Ramon is suspected, and I must look after him. My duty must not be neglected. You would not see Mexico rule Nuevo Madrid again, would you?"

"No, and she never will, while I'm in my officious capacity. But, wait; you say you believe this hyar Castro is hid in Don Ramon's house. Jest wait an' we will call thar an' see."

The alcalde was not without shrewdness. He saw that he had gained the first round in the battle, but, well aware that Mellough, with his two score soldiers, could rule in Nuevo Madrid if he tried, and that he would be upheld by those who had sent him, he perceived that the way for himself to preserve his show of authority was to accede to the lieutenant's wishes to a certain degree.

Consequently, bidding Long-Haired Max follow him, he prepared to go to Don Ramon's with the blue-coats. He was strong in the faith that that gentleman would clear himself, for though he knew nothing of Eduardo Castro, said to be his nephew, he knew the don to be devoted to the American cause.

All the citizens of Nuevo Madrid had turned out to look at the blue-coats, and more than one dark faced Mexican restlessly fingered his *cuchilelo* as he watched them, but when Alcalde Jones loudly ordered his horse and showed in every way that he was still in authority, even the skulking *mendigo* who had the day before ascribed his poverty to him, now showered blessings on his head.

Better an American mayor than an American soldier.

The party took their way toward Casa Victoria, and as the hour was still early, they found no trouble in gaining admission, though the gate-keeper stared in horror as the armed soldiers crowded into the *patio*.

Mellough was in favor of pushing unannounced into Victoria's presence, but Jones would not hear to it. No one could leave the casa unseen by them, and he was resolved to proceed in a gentlemanly manner.

As a result, he was at last ushered into Don Ramon's presence with no companions except the lieutenant and Long-Haired Max.

Victoria and his daughter were alone present, but both showed surprise at the visit.

The alcalde, forcing a jovial air he did not feel, greeted them warmly and then introduced his companions.

For a moment, Long-Haired Max forgot their disagreeable errand as he bowed low before Donna Inez. Neither betrayed the fact that they had met before, but he felt a thrill of exultation that their acquaintanceship could go on from that hour without great trouble.

Don Ramon, never losing his courtly politeness, expressed his pleasure at meeting Mellough, but when he would have called for refreshments, the lieutenant, paying no heed to the alcalde's imploring look, stopped him by a motion.

"Excuse me, Don Ramon," he said, "but I have come on business, and in such cases a soldier should not feast and drink."

"On business?" repeated Victoria, a troubled look on his face.

"Yes," said Jones, quickly. "On business, but nothin' serious. You see thar is a durnation mistake—"

"There is no mistake," interrupted Mellough, rudely. "I have come, sir, to arrest your nephew, one Eduardo Castro!"

CHAPTER XV.

THE BLOW FALLS.

THIS plain statement fell forcibly on all who heard, but with different results. Jones was angry, Max anxious, Don Ramon's troubled look increased and Inez became very pale.

Mellough had not failed to note the result of

his words, and he grew sufficiently elated to add:

"More than that, you are charged with harboring him, and with being in league with the gang of which he is one—a gang formed to deliver California again into the hands of the Mexicans!"

Don Ramon seemed speechless with astonishment, and the alcalde pressed to the front.

"O' course it are a durnation blunder," he said, warmly. "Nobody who knows ther ingredients o' law believes any part on't it."

The Spaniard, standing proudly erect, preserved his outward calmness wonderfully.

"In plain words, I am charged with treason?" he said, looking at the lieutenant.

The latter moved uneasily, as a weak-minded man will before his mental superior, but the viciousness of his nature was not subdued.

"Yes,—and with harboring traitors."

"Meaning Eduardo Castro?"

"Yes."

"You say you have come to arrest him. Very well, sir, I desire you, first of all, to search my house. I am sorry to say that he is my nephew, but I most emphatically add that I know nothing of his business or of his present whereabouts. For a year, he has been forbidden to darken my doors."

Even Mellough was staggered by his plain and dignified assertion, and it was with more meekness that he made preparation to search. Don Ramon directed a servant to show him over the whole *casa*, but for his own part, the don remained seated with Inez, Max and the alcalde about him.

The latter soon made it clear that only the lieutenant was to be looked upon as lacking in sympathy, but Don Ramon, while confident that Eduardo Castro would not be found on his premises, was troubled by the charge of treason.

As we have before stated, he had become an American citizen so far as man's work and wishes could go. He had seen that that people were destined by their energy and intelligence to become a power on the earth second to none, and it was his wish that his descendants should enjoy all the advantages of the future.

Such being the case, we need scarcely say that he had never conspired against American authority.

After a while the tramp of feet was heard outside the room and half a dozen soldiers marched through the doorway. At their head was Mellough, and in their midst, securely held, with disordered and torn dress, was a young Mexican.

He gave evidence of rough handling, and his face bore a look of mingled anxiety and defiance.

The scene was an unpleasant surprise to all in the room, and Inez became very pale as she murmured one word:

"Eduardo!"

The name threw a flood of light upon Max Baldwin's mind. In the prisoner he recognized the man Donna Inez had met in the orange-grove, and who had laid a trap for her abduction, and the fact that the man was Eduardo Castro removed one load from the cavalier's mind.

Senorita Victoria had gone to meet, not a lover, but a cousin, and the fact that he had been forbidden the house by Don Ramon explained why she met him secretly.

His appearance, however, placed a darker look on the business of the hour.

"Ha, ha!" laughed Mellough, with the triumph of a low mind; "so you do not hide traitors? My dear Don Ramon, your game is up."

The coarse speech brought a red color into the Spaniard's cheeks. With his hands tightly clinched, he moved forward two or three paces.

"Dare you insinuate that I knew this man was in my house?" he demanded, in a ringing voice.

"Of course I do," Mellough replied.

"Then, by my life, you shall answer for the insult. I am a man nearly twice your own years, but if you do not retract the words I will—"

Don Ramon paused abruptly. A hand had been placed upon his arm, and the eyes of Donna Inez looked into his own.

"Father!"

The single word was uttered so softly as to be almost inaudible, but the effect was instantaneous. Don Ramon paused, and with his daughter by his side, struggled to regain his calmness.

A brief silence followed, for even the alcalde had the good judgment not to speak then, and the lieutenant actually cowered before the storm he had raised.

"I have gone too fast," said Victoria at last, and with calmness. "Your words cut me like a knife, sir, but I do not forget that you wear the uniform of the country to which I have sworn allegiance."

"It was a durnation blunder," said the alcalde, winking vigorously at Mellough. "I'm right sure ther lieutenant will say that same."

"He was concealed in the house," muttered the officer, uneasily, pointing to Eduardo Castro.

"Such a thing could easily happen without the knowledge of any of the household," said Max, stepping forward. "Don Ramon has said that they are not his friends, and I can support his testimony. Alcalde Jones told me some time ago that Castro was not allowed to visit Casa Victoria."

"Right you be, from your boot-heels up," said the alcalde. "We all stand hyar like *alibis* on legs."

The lieutenant began to think that he had gone too fast, and he was uttering a few confused remarks when another man pushed into the center of the room.

Long-Haired Max started; the new-comer was Colonel James Barstow.

Pausing near Mellough, he looked at Castro and the Victorias, but without perceiving Max or the alcalde.

"In Heaven's name, what is the trouble, Don Ramon?" he asked.

The Spaniard's face brightened somewhat, but his answer was simple.

"The officer will tell you," he said, motioning to Mellough.

"I am James Barstow, an ex-colonel of the United States Army," said that man, looking at the lieutenant. "As a friend of Don Ramon Victoria, I am surprised at this scene."

"I am merely obeying orders," muttered Mellough.

As an old officer, may I ask what is wrong?"

"There is a plot afoot to throw California again into the hands of the Mexicans, and he is charged with being concerned in that. Moreover, we have found concealed in his house a man we know to be in the plot."

Mellough spoke very politely, evidently being duly impressed by the "ex-colonel's" military title.

"He is in no degree responsible for this misguided man," said Barstow, looking at Castro. "I know them both, and they are not friends. Don Ramon is above suspicion!"

The words were spoken with emphasis but Alcalde Jones turned to Max.

"Ther durnation critter is playin' some game," he said, disgusted that Barstow should be arrayed on the side he himself upheld.

Max was impressed by the same belief, and, obeying a sudden impulse, he pushed forward to the center of the group.

"Exactly my opinion," he said, calmly, looking squarely into Barstow's face.

The latter started back in mingled surprise and anger. Plainly, he had not expected to see his enemy there, nor was the sight a pleasant one.

"You!" he muttered, mechanically.

"Yes, I! We are together in this matter, and I think our testimony combined can clear Don Ramon."

Barstow rallied quickly.

"Perhaps you know more than you would wish to tell—" he began, with unmistakable meaning; but Max interrupted him.

"On some matters my information is extensive, as you are aware. I hope you will not compel me to thrust foreign affairs into light at this time. Are we to pull together or not?"

"A trial will settle all," said Don Ramon.

"Ther boodwah o' justice is open," added the alcalde, "an' in fifteen minutes I kin give in my verdict. This case is strictly in my jurisprudence."

"You have nothing to do with it," snapped Mellough; "it is a military and not a civil case."

"Durnation wild-cats! what do I keer fur your views?" roared Jones. "O' course it ain't a civil case, fur you don't know what civility is, but I'm gwine ter try ther case, or bust thunder out o' art an' natur' a-tryin'. Ther case is in my jurisprudence, an' I'll see it through ef Blackstone an' Cook rip their bindin's!"

The worthy alcalde flung his arms about in a way dangerous to his neighbors, but Long-Haired Max, seeing that both Don Ramon and Inez were hurt and shamed by the turbulent scene, advanced to the front and suggested that all sit down and talk calmly. A little thoughtful deliberation won every one over to his views the idea was put into effect.

Mellough and Barstow alone looked dissatisfied. The latter had only been prevented from playing a heroic role by the presence of Long-Haired Max, and it was natural that he should scowl at him secretly.

The cavalier saw his advantage and he resolved to make use of it. Even in the hour of her distress, Inez Victoria was fair and charming, and Max knew very well that to act as a champion then would be to win her friendship and that of her father.

Taking the lead in conversation, he asked Eduardo Castro to make a statement, but the latter closed his lips and spoke not a word.

He was a fair sample of a Mexican of the higher class, and his face had some comeliness, but there were traces which told of a wild and reckless nature and of unrestrained dissipation.

Whatever was the truth he said nothing, and even the imploring look of Donna Inez seemed to fall on barren soil. Sullen and determined, he sat and heard in utter silence.

CHAPTER XVI.

MISS LINGARD ENTERS.

LONG-HAIRED MAX was not particularly surprised at Eduardo's obstinacy. If he had been forbidden the house by Don Ramon, what more was natural than that, seeing himself alone in his new trouble, he should refuse to speak the words which should clear his uncle?

"Next," said the cavalier, turning from the prisoner, "let the servants be questioned."

"Korrek as a fiddle," said the alcalde, "Send 'em up ter ther docket one together an' we'll catechism 'em. I reckon as how we'll get at ther main-spring o' ther misery, somehow."

Yet, as the servants came in, one by one, none of them would admit that they knew anything about the matter more than that Eduardo had been found in the house.

Don Ramon, who called the people one by one, reached the last name and there hesitated. The one remaining witness was Miss Lingard, the governess, and knowing her sensitive nature as he did, the don was very reluctant to subject her to the ordeal.

To some people it would be as nothing, but from the hour Miss Lingard first came to Casa Victoria, she had courted solitude and avoided strangers.

Yet, he felt it his duty to call her.

She came with her usual graceful and lady-like manner, but as her gaze flashed from face to face she shrunk back so perceptibly that Don Ramon was touched. He went to her side and took her hand.

"Have no fear, Miss Lingard," he said, with his dignified kindness. "We have a few questions to ask and then you are free to go."

"Don Ramon is right and you need not be at all troubled," added Spanish Max. "A few questions and then you—"

He paused abruptly. When he began to speak, Miss Lingard had turned her gaze upon his face, but at the first glance she had started, her eyes seemed reading his face anxiously, and then, suddenly, she began to tremble, and Don Ramon caught her just as she staggered.

"*Madre de Dios!*" he cried, breaking into Spanish in his alarm, "what is the matter? Ho! bring water, some one!"

The cry seemed to act as a restorative. Miss Lingard suddenly started from his hands and stood erect, and though her face was very pale, she smiled slightly.

"No, no; bring no water; do nothing. I am not ill; I am well. I—I am tired."

Don Ramon hastened to bring a chair, while the governess, after one more look at Long-Haired Max, sat down with her face in shadow.

"You wish to hear my story," she said, in her low, even tones, which were more like those of a nun than of a woman of the world.

When the tears of the world are numbered, will there be any record of those of the voice and heart—those unshed tears that burn like invisible fire?

"Can you tell anything?" gently asked Don Ramon, for Miss Lingard's own act had left Long-Haired Max at one side.

"I can tell much. Just after dark I saw Perez leave his post at the gate and go away. A few minutes later a man, hatless and excited, rushed into the *patio* and disappeared in the house. I thought it was Perez and wondered what was wrong, but, a little later, I saw the gate-keeper again at his post, and forgot the matter. I know now that Perez went away for awhile, and that during his absence the prisoner rushed in. I will swear to his identity."

"Where were you, madam?" brusquely asked Lieutenant Mellough.

"On the *azotea*, sir."

"Well, that doesn't prove but what Victoria concealed Castro."

"To an unprejudiced mind," said Max, again pushing forward, "it shows very clearly that Castro rushed in while the gate-keeper was away and concealed himself without being seen by any one."

"Korrek ter a fiddle!" added the alcalde. "It is the judgment o' this hyar court that an *alibi* has been proved an' I enter a verdict o' not guilty. I knowed it afore I heard ther evidence, an' I congratulate ther defense on havin' ther court in their favor!"

The speaker shook Don Ramon's hand, but Max, surprised that Mellough did not interfere, turned to look for the lieutenant and found Barstow whispering in his ear.

Long-Haired Max was quick-witted, and he at once saw something suspicious in this. What was there between these two men that they should not talk openly? Plainly, there was something to conceal, and in this case it meant a plot either before or after the time of whispering.

"Ah!" thought the cavalier. "Barstow has some scheme in his mind. Did he send these men here? I think a little watching will do no harm."

Mellough turned to the central figures of the group.

"I am willing to take the lady's version of the affair as correct," he said. "My prisoner I shall take to the village and hold until the arrival of my superior. I must, however, leave three of my men within this house. Your name,

Don Ramon, appears on the list of suspected parties, and I should fall in my duty did I not use some precautions."

"These are Barstow's words, not his," thought Max, quickly. "Mellough is not deep, but, for some reason, he is docile when Barstow touches the wire. Ah! what now?"

Barstow had glided out of the room with a catlike step, and, convinced that mischief was afoot, the cavalier promptly followed and managed to conceal himself behind a curtain, while the colonel hovered near the head of the stairs which led down to the patio.

Perhaps five minutes passed, and then Mellough came out with his prisoner. Barstow quickly mixed with the crowd, but Max, watching keenly, saw him whispering to Eduardo Castro, as he had done to the lieutenant.

No stop was made, and Barstow went half-way down the broad stairway, talking incessantly. It was a singular proceeding, but Mellough took no notice of it. The latter was at the head of his force, with Alcalde Jones by his side, and, so fast did the lieutenant talk, Jones neither noticed Barstow's conduct nor the absence of Max.

The latter, however, had crept near the stairs, and as the party went down he was well rewarded. Barstow pressed Castro's hand in farewell, and the spy plainly heard him say:

"Have no fear; I will save you!"

Then he turned back, reached the upper floor and hovered near the stairway. Max, who had retreated to the cover of the curtains again, was at once triumphant and uneasy; he had seen enough to prove that the colonel was playing a treacherous part, but what would be the result if he was found skulking in his cover?

He had not been invited to remain, and he might be taken for a thief? True, he had befriended the family, and he could explain what he had seen, but would his word be believed against that of the rich and well-known Colonel Barstow?

Despite all this, he kept his place with that determination which was a part of his nature. Whatever the result, he wished to know one thing more.

Barstow, standing outside the room where Don Ramon, Inez and Miss Lingard still were, looked anxiously and eagerly in that direction. If appearances were reliable, he wished to see one particular one. Which one of the three was it?

The question was answered as a look of joy flashed over the colonel's face, and turning, Max saw that the governess had come out of the room.

She took two steps forward, and then paused and grew pale at sight of Barstow. She was not surprised, for she had seen him in the room, but that same reason which had caused her to faint when first she saw him at Casa Victoria, now made her small amount of color recede, and brought a look of alarm into her eyes.

His triumphant face strangely in contrast with hers, Barstow hastened to advance.

"I have been waiting for you," he said, quickly.

Miss Lingard drew herself up with a cold face. Max believed she tried to appear haughtily surprised, but the effort was a failure.

"For me, sir?" she said.

"Yes."

"I beg your pardon, but I have not the honor of your acquaintance."

He laughed mockingly.

"You knew me once very well, as I can prove to Don Ramon Victoria, if you wish. The price of my silence is simple; accompany me to the azotea where we can talk freely, and all will be well."

"In Heaven's name, spare me!" she cried, clasping her hands.

"Hush!" he said, imperiously. "This is no place for stage antics. An unguarded word will bring out the don, and it would pain me to tell him just what sort of a woman he has taken in as his daughter's companion."

Max Baldwin's blood boiled at the words. The colonel spoke coarsely, contemptuously and overbearingly; and to an honest man there is something revolting in the idea of a man using his power to oppress a woman.

Miss Lingard yielded to his will.

"Enough—enough!" she said hurriedly. "Follow me."

She turned away; and well aware that their course was toward the azotea, Max stood in irresolution. He wished to know what they said, to know the secret of Barstow's power over the governess, and to help her if he could; but it was not according to his nature to act the spy and listener.

One moment he hesitated; but the refined, sad face of the governess seemed to arise as though urging him on, and with a sudden movement he left the cover of the curtains. His resolution was taken.

CHAPTER XVII.

LONG HAIRIED MAX TAKES UP THE TRAIL.

WITH a light step the cavalier ascended the stairs which led to the azotea. He had allowed his predecessors time to gain the house-top safe-

ly, and yet he used caution as he crept upward himself.

Barely raising his head above the level, he looked for the others, but they were invisible. By their voices, however, he knew they were at the further side of the azotea.

In erecting his house, Don Ramon had adhered to the good old custom of his people, which converts the top of the house into the most pleasant part thereof, but having no especial taste for flowers, he had not distributed many along the roof.

In the very center of the space stood two or three tubs, which shot upward quite sturdy plants, and Max at once saw that these, which concealed Barstow and Miss Lingard from his view, would also serve as a cover for himself.

Once more he felt a deep shame as he crept along on his hands and knees, but reaching the plants, he forgot all else in an attempt to overhear what was being said.

Having gone to the extreme corner of the azotea the governess and her companion stood facing each other, only a few feet apart, but with an attitude which told that they were far from occupying the position from motives of love or friendship.

They were talking steadily, but Max was so far away that he could catch only now and then a word. Barstow seemed to be trying to prevail on her to enter some plot with him, but she refused every offer. He was meek and indulged in pleading; she, evidently let by horror, but firm in her opposition.

Max heard the colonel refer to "the old life," he heard him offer to make the governess rich; and a gesture of utter loathing on her part was called forth by his assertion that he still loved her.

Finding her so firm, the man's manner changed.

"By Heaven! we will see whether you yield!" he cried, raising his voice. "Refuse to aid me and I will go to Don Ramon and tell him all!"

"Do your worst!" she answered, with a firmness which surprised Max. "You may crush me, but I will not turn upon those who have sheltered me when—"

She paused suddenly.

"When what?" Barstow demanded. "I have a good deal of curiosity to know what brought you to California and how you became a member of this household."

"I shall tell you nothing."

He caught her by the arm.

"By the gods! I am tempted to strangle you, woman!" he hissed. "How dare you defy me when I hold such a power over your head? How dare you be such a fool?"

Greatly excited, Long-Haired Max gathered himself for a forward spring if Barstow went any further. He was moved to a strange degree by the scene. Somehow the voice of the pale-faced governess awakened a familiar something, a chord of the past, in his own life, and yet he did not know that he had ever seen her.

At any rate, hers was a gentle nature, and woe be to James Barstow if he went too far!

The voice of the lady arose firmly.

"You might as well threaten a rock," she said. "I have reached that point where death has less terror for me than life."

He dropped his hand with a bitter curse.

"You are beyond my comprehension," he said, sullenly. "Once you were less brave."

"That was before I knew you—or rather, before your life had thrown its shadow like a blight upon my own. Still, I am not brave now—I am indifferent."

"You are a fool, like all of your sex!" he brutally said, finding consolation in easing off his venom somehow.

"Had I been less of a fool and you less of a villain, we would not be here to-night. You, sir, have ruined my life, and now, at the age of thirty, when I should be in my prime, I am old, worn and hopeless. I often wonder why some people, without a sin charged against them, are made to suffer when the rogues go free. I can see no justice in such an order of fate."

"I see you can preach as well as ever," the colonel sneered; "but you must allow me to amend some of your remarks. If you are not happy, it is because you have been so confounded scrupulous. I saw a chance to win a fortune and asked for your aid. You refused, and I lost the prize. After that I swore revenge, and secured it."

Long-Haired Max was so excited he could scarcely keep his place. The cool villainy of the colonel brought to his mind the fact that this man was the murderer of his father, and he longed to throw himself upon him and avenge two wrongs at once.

At this moment the sound of voices indicated that some other persons were about to ascend to the azotea, and Barstow and Miss Lingard ceased speaking. No one came, however, and they resumed their conversation, but in so low a tone that Max heard no more.

The colonel continued in an angry mood, and seemed to threaten freely, but she remained firm, and he finally turned away.

"I am going now," he said; "but you shall see me again. I swear that I will humble you to the dust!"

"Do your worst; I defy you!"

She spoke bravely, but when Barstow had left the azotea sunk upon her knees and burst into sobs which seemed to shake her slender frame as by a tempest.

Max longed to go to her side and express his sympathy, but he felt that it would not do, and he had other work on hand. He wished to follow Barstow, and that too, if possible, without being seen by any of the inmates of the casa.

He went to the rear of the house and looked down. Was it safe to leap from the azotea? The question was superfluous; it was not safe; but he resolved to risk it.

Consequently, he stepped over the parapet and, balancing himself well, took the leap.

He alighted with a painful shock, but without actual injury, and in a moment he was on his feet and hurrying around the house.

Greatly to his satisfaction, he saw the colonel just leaving, and as the latter walked away toward his own house, the cavalier settled upon his trail like a bloodhound.

In the meanwhile, Miss Lingard had been interrupted on the azotea. She was still sobbing as before when a hand was laid gently on her head, but the touch was sufficient to cause her to spring to her feet.

Don Ramon Victoria stood before her.

"Pardon me, Miss Lingard," he said with his usual air of mingled dignity and gentleness, "I was very thoughtless, and—perhaps I was presumptuous; but I saw you in tears and my sympathy carried me too far."

"It is nothing, Don Ramon," she answered, striving to regain her composure. "I am not frightened—now I know it is you. I am foolish, that is all."

"Tears are never folly," he said, gravely.

"By some they are deemed a mark of weakness; to me, they seem like the fountain that washes away folly, sin and pride. To you, who know nothing of these things, my remarks may seem obscure. I fear that you have been overtaken by the scene below. I hesitated to call you as a witness, knowing your sensitive nature, but I thought you would know as little about that unhappy young man as the rest of us. You had to tell your story and the effort has been too severe."

"No! no!" she cried, touched by the grave kindness of his voice. "I am very glad that it was so; glad that I could explain as I did. As for my—my position here, it was childish."

"I am pained to see you weep, Miss Lingard. Tell me, is there anything I can do for you?"

"Nothing, Don Ramon. I thank you most sincerely, but all is well—"

She paused; she had not the strength to finish the reassuring assertion she had begun.

"You are a stranger in this Pacific land," said he, slowly, "but I wish you to feel that the friends you have made are true ones. Donna Inez has for you an almost sisterly affection, while on my own part, I wish to have you feel that Casa Victoria is your home in as much of a reality as though—pardon me—you were not a dependent."

The words needed no apology; the kind tone in which they were uttered removed all suspicion that they were spoken to remind her of the fact that she was the teacher of Donna Inez.

"You are very kind, Don Ramon," she said, gratefully.

"We shall now have a period of vexation," he continued. "Three soldiers have been left in the house, and I suppose there will be an attempt made to connect me with these alleged plotters. The attempt will fail. I am as loyal to the United States government as the men who sit in the halls of Congress, at Washington. Whatever occurs, I hope hereafter to shield Inez and yourself."

"Every one about Nuevo Madrid will testify in your favor," she said with interest.

"I believe they will, but the trouble of that misguided young man, Eduardo Castro, will weigh against me. I will not express an opinion as to his guilt, but I will say to you that he has given me a great deal of trouble in the past. His mother was my sister and his father—well, had he been less of a villain he would never have dared aspire to my sister's hand. It was a secret marriage, and it resulted as most of such rash affairs do."

"At the age of ten Eduardo was left an orphan. From that hour he was under my charge until his multitude of little crimes obliged me to close my doors upon him. How much I bore before that decision was made, I may some time tell you, but not now. Enough of this, however; let us go below and join Inez."

And then, during the remainder of the time that they remained together that night, he endeavored with his rare tact to make the two ladies forget all that had occurred that was unpleasant.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE MYSTERY OF THE MISSION.

LONG HAIRIED MAX started on Barstow's trail with a determination to follow him to some den or other. When he started it had been with a feeling that his enemy might visit some confederate, or, at the least, go to the village to see Lieutenant Mellough; but as he turned toward

His own residence, the spy's hopes began to fall.

The colonel walked rapidly along the road without looking behind him, but as he neared the old mission his pace slackened and Max redoubled his caution.

Abreast the ruined building Barstow turned and directed an earnest gaze down the road, but he did not see the dark heap which lay at one side. Max had promptly prostrated himself.

Then the pursued turned to the right and went up the hill directly toward the ruin.

"What now?" muttered Max, crawling after him like a snake. "Can he have an appointment, or why does he seek this tumble-down old den?"

It was a timely question, for, after another glance, the colonel disappeared through the main doorway.

The spy was tempted to rush forward and discover what he was doing, but prudence came to his aid and, since he was directly in front of the building, contented himself with making a circuit by which to gain the rear.

In this he succeeded, and, moving forward, he reached the wall. All remained silent within, but he knew Barstow was still there.

After some trouble he succeeded in gaining a foothold, and ascended to the top of the wall, but he seemed no nearer a solution of the mystery. He could look down into the confused pile of in-fallen masonry, but in the darkness nothing was visible.

The old mission had for a long time exerted a deep influence over his mind. From the hour when he saw the pantomime on the broken wall—the strange movements of the ghostly monk and his female victim, he had felt that some deep mystery was connected with the ruin.

Too sensible to believe in the specter theory, he believed that some strong motive must exist for the affair. Plainly, some one desired the people in general to keep away from the mission, to shun the spot through actual fear. Now it seemed that Barstow was one of the schemers, and he wondered what was the object of that astute plotter.

Resolved to investigate, whatever the risk might be, he finally swung over the wall, and dropped to the interior.

His situation had become gloomy and, perhaps, dangerous. The desolation of the ruin was in itself no trifling matter, and to this must be added the ghosts and the more substantial forms he believed near him.

With his weapons ready for use, he glided along near the wall with a cautious step. He was in what had once been a spacious room, but the floor was now littered with shapeless blocks and broken pillars, which in some places formed stumbling-blocks, and in others, formed low passages where he had to stoop to pass through.

Despite all this he kept on, slowly and carefully, and at the end of half an hour he believed he had explored every foot of the interior.

"What the dickens has become of Barstow?" he muttered, as he at last paused near the door. "Has he left the place, or is he still here and in some secret room? It would not be at all odd if such rooms existed, and in the present state of affairs it would be almost impossible to locate a hidden room."

Reluctant to abandon his work, he sat down on a broken pillar, and awaited with what patience he could. He was anxious to be in the village, with the alcalde, but still greater was his desire to know something of Barstow.

The man who was to be his own chief witness against the colonel—he who had seen Ernest Baldwin murdered—had not yet arrived at Nuevo Madrid. He was expected every hour, but his illness might have proved more obstinate than was expected—he might even be dead!

The last thought was too unpleasant to be entertained. Without him, he could not bring Barstow to justice.

Just as he was beginning to believe that the colonel had outwitted him by entering the mission as a ruse, there was a sound of voices only a few feet away, and two men came out of the darkness.

Keeping his place, Long-Haired Max looked and listened eagerly. He recognized the voice of Barstow at once.

"Once more," he was saying, "let me impress upon your mind the necessity of haste. You must see Captain Peters before he leaves port; a failure might ruin the Black League, and bring some of us into a bad fix. Unless the stay of the soldiers is longer than I expect, the Water Witch must keep away from the coast while they remain. That Mellough is a block-head, but he may get an idea by chance."

"Cuss ther man w'ot sent them hyer!"

"That man knew what he was about," said the colonel, sharply. "Don't be afraid of the soldiers, and, above all, don't have any trouble with them. They are my friends, and I can wind Mellough around my finger. If all works as I hope, their work may enable the Black League to labor openly."

"In that case, I reckon ther profits wouldn't

be so big fur me'n ther boys," was the quick reply.

"Nonsense! it would be just the same," said the colonel; but Max detected the annoyance in his tone. Plainly he had said too much. "I give you my word that I'll not go back on you," he continued, "and not one of the Brethren can say that I ever lied to them. But, enough of this. Hasten to Jabez Peters, and deliver my message. Don't forget a word of it; it is too important to be forgotten, and, as I said before, too important to be risked in writing."

Barstow led the way through the gate, and Max, following to that point, saw the two go as far as the main road and then separate. The colonel turned toward his home; his messenger glided away toward the village.

The spy made no attempt to follow, though, had it not been for Barstow's closing words, he would have attacked the lesser villain with a hope of gaining some clew.

His work had not been without a perceptible gain, however, for he had gained conclusive evidence that the colonel was connected with the mysterious Black League—more, that he was a leader, if not the superior of all. At any rate, Jabez Peters held his directions in sufficient respect to obey.

The purpose of the mysterious hand became more and more bewildering to Max. For one moment he had thought the schooner and her crew might have a political meaning, but Barstow had swept away that idea.

Barstow had expressed a hope that the work of the soldiers might result in good to the Black League, so it was clear he was not in a political plot.

Since the men of the coast were not conspirators, smugglers, nor pirates, what were they? Beyond a shadow of a doubt, they had a secret, unlawful business, but to save his life the cavalier could not have guessed it.

He did not delay at the mission a great while, but hastened to the village to see Alcalde Jones. That worthy man was sitting alone in his office, fanning his flushed face with his hat.

"Darnation wildcats! I'm glad ter see you, right glad. I'd begun ter think you'd vamoosed."

"I've been busy, alcalde. What of the soldiers and their prisoner?"

"Ther last critter is in ther Bustile o' this city, an' ther sojers are quartered in Sim Slocum's new buildin'. It has never ben ther policy o' this hyar jewrisprudence ter hev 'comerdations fur sojers, an' it never will be while I sit in ther boodwab o' justice. I kin defeat any measure lookin' ter that end, even ef ev'ry two-legged gopher in town votes fur it, 'cause it are my business ter count the votes."

His honor spoke with emphasis, for within the last few hours the United States military force had fallen low in his opinion.

"What do you think of all this hue and cry?" gravely asked the cavalier, who was becoming accustomed to Mr. Jones's peculiarities.

"Jest what any loyal man would do, sir. I don't b'lieve in hev'in' a single feather plucked out o' ther tail o' ther American bird o' freedom; but ther to'in' o' these hyar critters inter my jewrisprudence is an insult which would make Blackstone an' Cook turn green ef they was alive. Ain't I able ter run this hyar city? Ain't I allays stood hyar like a bulwark o' sacred freedom?"

The alcalde had arisen, and with his left hand on his hip, he stretched out the right in such a fashion that, somehow, his arm and spreading fingers reminded Max of the Mississippi river and its tributaries.

"You have done nobly," said the cavalier, "but there is yet more to do."

"Darnation wildcats! I hope more will be did. I shall sleep mighty sound ter-night, when I go ter bed, an' ef any armed mob arises an' attempts ter storm the city Bustile, as ther Israelites did in France durin' ther reign of George IV, I shan't wake up. Nary wake, now you kin sw'ar!"

Max managed to gather the alcalde's meaning out of this chaos of history, but also afraid that some spy would do the same, he managed to get the indignant official back into his chair, and secured a promise that he would moderate his tone.

"I suspect a plot," he said.

"So do I. I suspect half a dozen on 'em, an' each is wuss than t'other."

"But I think Mellough and Barstow are in collusion."

A look of awe passed over the alcalde's face.

"In what?" he faintly asked.

"Collusion. In other words, I believe Barstow knows more about what sent the soldiers here than he has confessed, and I believe that he and Mellough have some secret and dishonorable end in view."

"Right, my bovee, right. No doubt they are in collusion. Darnation wildcats! they are jest ther critters fur plots, cabals, an' sneakin' tricks. But, give me your views in full."

Max told what he had learned by watching Colonel Barstow, explaining how he had whispered to Mellough, how he had mixed with the soldiers, while the lieutenant occupied the al-

calde's attention, and thus gained a chance to whisper to the prisoner, "I will save you;" and, afterward, all that had occurred at the old mission.

Napoleon Jones was delighted. He saw all the men he hated clearly branded as dishonest plotters, and his wrath arose to such a pitch that he would have gone out to accuse them at once had not Max prevented him.

The alcalde was impulsive, but he was no fool, and he soon saw the necessity of careful work. To accuse Mellough and Barstow of double dealing on the strength of the cavalier's word would be to lose the battle; one was an army officer and the other an ex-officer who was now a rich man; they must be still hunted to earth.

"We will be wise as serpents and as silent as scorpions," said Max. "Mellough, I take it, is but a tool in Barstow's hands, but the latter has such extensive plots afoot that he must yet make a false move. I, of all men, wish to bring him to ruin—I swear that I will do it—but it's the silent chase that catches the hare."

"Right you are!" Jones declared, and they clasped hands on their offensive and defensive league.

CHAPTER XIX.

BARSTOW MAKES A PROPOSAL.

THE night passed peacefully. No armed force arose to storm the "Bastile," as Alcalde Jones termed the one-story adobe prison, and when men arose in the morning they took up the thread of their lives without finding that any strands had been spirited away during the night.

Still, there were few happy people in Nuevo Madrid. The Mexican population cordially hated all men in blue, for they had wrested the Pacific coast from Mexican control; and the Americans, knowing that there had been trouble between Jones and Mellough, unanimously gave their sympathy to the former.

As a result, the little lieutenant had the doubtful pleasure, whenever he went abroad, of seeing the Greasers scowl at him and handle their knives suggestively, while his own country men showed no respect, and, like the alcalde, persisted in placing the accent of his own name on the first, instead of the last, syllable, thus transforming him into "Lieutenant Mellow," or, worse still, "Meller."

A man may learn in time to be reconciled to a lack of personal beauty, but even to the day of his death he will resent a mutilation of his name.

Being very sensitive, Mellough hated the people of Nuevo Madrid as long as he lived.

Immediately after breakfast, the blue coats were in the saddle, and, leaving only ten men at the jail, Mellough led them away on an expedition which was understood to mean a search of houses near the town.

Long-Haired Max did not remain in idleness, but, having stationed Tim Foley where he could watch the jail and see if the prisoner, Castro, was meddled with, the cavalier himself went to the ruined mission and lay down on the broken wall where he could watch Colonel Barstow's house.

The result showed the correctness of his judgment.

At the end of half an hour the colonel came out and advanced along the road. Whither was he going? With his face south, it might be to the mission, to Don Ramon's casa or to the village.

He soon passed the mission, however, walking with a business-like step. Once he glanced toward the ruin but made no pause; and Max leaped from the wall and hurried along the ridge, keeping in the cover of the rocks, but never losing sight of Barstow for any great length of time.

The latter, however, moved openly, and having reached Casa Victoria, turned at once toward the gate.

"Aha! so that is his objective point," muttered the cavalier, exultantly.

"So it seems!"

The words were spoken just behind him, and, wheeling suddenly, he confronted her who had uttered them. Her, for it was a woman.

Long-Haired Max was surprised at the encounter, wholly at a loss to know who the woman was, and not a little troubled because she had seen him spying on Barstow.

Recovering his self-possession, he touched his hat politely.

"Pardon me, but I believed I was alone," he said.

"Your hint is gently given, but if I have listened to what was not intended for my ears, it was not to do harm to you. Why should I? You have followed yonder man from the ruined mission. Very well, I have followed him from his house!"

Max started slightly. Her last words recalled to his mind the mysterious woman who had given him warning on the night when he had visited Barstow, and he believed he saw a similarity about their forms.

While speaking the last words, the eyes of the woman had been on the colonel who, by his route, was passing near them. His own gaze was on the casa and he did not look toward the

ridge, but had he done so, the rocks and bushes would in a measure have concealed them.

The woman, however, was much excited, as Max could see by her flashing eyes and contracted brow, and she suddenly drew a revolver and stepped forward to a large rock.

Beyond that she had a clear view of Barstow, and she thrust forward her weapon and seemed to take aim.

"Hold!" exclaimed Long-Haired Max, catching her hand. "In Heaven's name, do not fire!"

She instantly withdrew the revolver and laughed in an unmusical way.

"Have no fear," she said. "I am aware that his time has not yet come, but it is a satisfaction to hold him for one moment at my mercy."

"You are not his friend, then?"

She made a quick gesture.

"I am more of a friend to a hideous snake."

"Have I not seen you before?"

"Possibly."

"If I am not mistaken, you one night warned me that a man was lying in ambush for me."

"You are right; I have no wish to deny it. But see; Barstow is entering Casa Victoria."

"I see; but perhaps you can tell me why he goes."

"Have you not suspected his object?"

"Dimly, perhaps; but I would like light."

"He, too, seeks light—that of the eyes of Donna Inez."

The cavalier started.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"I am, but I cannot tell all that is in his busy mind. I know that he asked for the girl's hand and that Don Ramon gave him no satisfaction. He said that Donna Inez was not to marry until after a season or two at Washington, but Barstow was shrewd enough to see that Victoria did not care to give his daughter's future into such hands. I heard Barstow swear that he would find some way of bringing them to the dust, as he expressed it, and I know that he has some scheme now working which aims at that end. What the scheme is I do not know."

"You are an inmate of his house, are you not?"

"Yes."

"Will you tell me in what capacity?"

"Not at present; but as I am his foe, I see no reason why we should not work together against him. I know how you hate him, for I overheard your interview, but it is only one of the dark chapters in his life; he is an adept in crime. He thinks me a creature of clay, and, though we often pass weeks without speaking, he believes I have not the strength of mind to be dangerous. He shall see by and by!"

Long-Haired Max looked in surprise at this strange woman. She was probably not more than thirty-five years of age, but she was prematurely aged. Already she was as gray and time-marked as she should have been at forty-five. Max thought of Miss Lingard, and wondered if the touch of James Barstow was a plague. Wherever he went he left sorrow; but this woman seemed to have a good deal of spirit left.

In one hand she carried a scarf which she now proceeded to arrange on her head. Before her long, loose hair had been uncovered, and this, with the light in her eyes, gave Max grave doubts of her sanity.

Some further conversation convinced him that she could indeed tell no more of the colonel's plans, and as she had declined to speak of herself, he referred to her offer to become his ally. She readily agreed, and promised to keep him informed of all that fell under her notice.

"I have means of hearing much that Barstow thinks he confides only to himself," she added, with a triumphant smile. "I often hear you spoken of, and though the colonel has vainly laid three traps for you, he relies chiefly on the fact that he has men watching for the arrival of your chief witness. He hopes to assassinate him on his way to Nuevo Madrid."

"Ha! so that is why he has troubled me so little?"

"Yes; but you are far from being safe. He will attack you again, rest assured of that."

"I thank you very much for your news, and now I can work against him more easily. I'll try to keep my witness out of his hands."

"Enough for now then, for I must return to the house. Stay! should you receive a note signed 'Miss Smith,' you may know it is from me. Good day."

She said no more but hurried back along the ridge, and before she was out of sight Max was striding toward Casa Victoria.

Let us precede him, and enter with Colonel Barstow.

Don Ramon and Inez were alone when the visitor was announced, and he was at once admitted.

He came in quickly, and as they were seated near each other, gave each a hand.

"I have come over early because I wish to do all I can for you," he explained, with a profuse show of friendship. "I cannot express to you how deeply I feel for you in your trouble, and knowing that you are innocent of any complicity with this unfortunate affair, I propose to use the privilege of a neighbor and fight by your side until the battle is won."

He had aroused quite a ripple of enthusiasm, but it was plain to see that it was confined to his own person. Inez, having released her hand, looked coldly at the floor, and Don Ramon retained his usual dignity and composure.

"I thank you for your kindness," he said, "but I am disposed to regard this affair as one almost trivial. What is there against me? Nothing except the fact that I am a Spaniard, while, I suppose, my nephew is implicated. In my favor there is much. Every one of my acquaintances knows that I am devoted to the cause of the United States."

"I wish the first statement was as true as the last!" sighed Barstow, turning his gaze away.

"Ha! do you mean to say there is proof against me?" demanded Don Ramon, with unusual vehemence.

"Pardon me, sir; I do not mean as you think, but I am aware that certain papers exist which have a bad look. Doubtless your name has been used without any authority, and it is to baffle your enemies, to become your champion, that I have called to-day."

Barstow uttered this long speech in gentle, oily tones, but Don Ramon grew more and more excited as he proceeded. A terrible fury burned in the Spaniard's eyes, and, suddenly arising, he grasped Barstow's arm and almost thundered his reply.

"Dare you insinuate that any papers exist which are compromising to my honor?" he vehemently cried.

CHAPTER XX.

THE PRICE OF SAFETY.

BRAVE as Colonel Barstow unquestionably was, he shrunk back from the storm he had raised. The old don was so majestically grand in his wrath that the lesser soul of the plotter cowered before him.

He put out both hands deprecatingly.

"I implore you be calm; save your anger for those who deserve it. Have I not said that I believe your name was used without your consent? If I have referred to compromising papers, it is only because I have seen that of which I speak."

Before he had finished Don Ramon had dropped his hand and the look on his face told that he deeply regretted his hasty indignation.

"I beg a thousand pardons, colonel," he said, with that deep regret which, in one of his station in life, never degenerates into self-abasement. "At my age, a man should not be so hasty. If I have not wounded you too deeply, I would like to hear what you have seen."

Barstow sighed heavily and looked through the window a moment before replying. He wished to give the impression that he was reluctant to tell bad news, and as an actor he was very good in his old role of a hypocrite.

"Certain papers," he slowly said, "were found on the person of Eduardo Castro, papers which related to this incipient rebellion. In these occur the names of many of the conspirators, and, Don Ramon, by some unaccountable chance, yours is among them."

Inez clasped her hands and became very pale, but Barstow's manner had already prepared Victoria for the announcement.

"Say, rather, by some one's perjury," he said, calmly. "How it occurred I cannot say, but I think I see the hand of Eduardo Castro in this. If he has engaged in treasonable work, what is more likely than that he should have used my name as a cover for his intrigues, for the control of his timid allies?"

The words were spoken more as a soliloquy than to those present.

"Oh! *madre de Dios!*" exclaimed Inez, "this cannot be. Surely, there is some mistake. Colonel Barstow, are you sure you read correctly? Eduardo would not be so base; there is some mistake!"

The colonel bent his head to hide the gleam of satisfaction in his eyes. At last Inez Victoria was touched; before the game was ended he would have her at his feet.

"Nothing would be more pleasing to me than to know I was mistaken, but I have even more than the evidence of my own eyes. I have been allowed to copy two of these papers, and you shall read for yourself."

He drew them from his pocket and passed one to each. We need not give their contents here; it is enough to say that the originals, if genuine, seemed to brand Ramon Victoria as a traitor to his adopted country.

Without losing his calmness, he read both and then silently handed them back to Barstow.

"No," said the latter. "Keep and destroy them. I do not want them in my possession."

"You say you were allowed to copy these?"

"Yes, Don Ramon, but only after long hours of argument and entreaty. I went to Lieutenant Mellough and asked for the privilege, reminding him that I, too, had been a soldier. He firmly refused. I asked again, and again he refused; but persistence at last won the battle. Perhaps not much was gained, but I was resolved to know what they had against you, and give you a chance to form a defense. I should have come here directly from the jail, but as I

had not retired at all during the night, I went first to rearrange my toilet."

Barstow told his lie with ease and cunning, for under the last sentence he had said, in substance, "I had worked for you all night."

Don Ramon, who did not think of doubting his word, was really touched by all this. He had never liked the colonel, but it seemed that he had a generous nature, after all.

So the unsuspecting Spaniard, thoroughly honorable himself, expressed his thanks warmly. Barstow expected as much from Inez, but she was looking steadily out of the window.

"I have but just begun," continued the schemer. "I have been a soldier, and it is a part of my creed never to cease fighting while the enemy is in arms. I now propose to destroy all proof of your connection with this affair. These papers which speak against you are living lies; they must not appear at the trial."

"How can it be prevented?"

"Easily enough, if you agree to my plan."

"What is your plan?"

"Your safety demands that the papers be burned. There is but one way to do this. We must secure them by some stratagem."

Don Ramon looked troubled, for even with his own safety at stake he did not like the idea of doing anything not strictly honorable, but Donna Inez looked at the matter with the elasticity of youth.

"How can that be done?" she asked, quickly.

"I have thought of a way, but I hesitate to break it to you."

"Then it must be dishonorable, and consequently not to be considered," said Don Ramon.

"Wait, *padre mio*; let us hear the plan," said Inez, placing her hand caressingly on his shoulder.

The crisis was at hand, but at that moment the schemer hesitated. To himself his plan looked weak and sure to fail, but it must be tried.

"I have a plan," he continued, "which must succeed if I can put it in force, and in its execution only my own hands will be needed. Donna Inez and yourself need do nothing. I said the papers must be burned, but that was to test your feelings in the matter. I have a surer way. I possess a liquid which, when poured upon writing, will at once remove all trace of the ink. You have heard of such things. I possess the article."

"But how is it to be used?" demanded Inez, who was not slow to grasp his meaning.

Barstow was delighted. Cool as the senorita had been but a moment before, she was now all interest. She believed she saw hope for saving her father's reputation, and in her opinion the end justified the means.

"That is what puzzled me at first, but it occurred to me, after a little reflection, that if I could get the lieutenant to lodge in my house I might pour the liquid on his papers while he slept. I gave the invitation and he declined. 'Since my blow is to fall on the Mexicans,' he said, 'it will not do for me to lodge with an American. People will then say that justice is blind and all Americans free from suspicion.'"

"He was thoughtful," commented Don Ramon.

"I then suggested that he take up his residence in your own *casa*, but again he declined."

"For what reason?"

"He said that if he lived with a Mexican, Americans would then accuse him of sympathizing with them."

"A foolish objection," said Don Ramon, upon whom these objections acted as an argument in favor of destroying the dangerous writing.

"I told him so, but he was firm. Later, however, he laughed, and said: 'If I could but find a household where the master was of one nationality and the mistress of another, I might then accept their hospitality and run no risk.'"

"This Mellough is more keen-witted than I thought him," Don Ramon said, in surprise.

"Yet, I outwitted him! I overthrew his scruples! I played a card which swept the board!" Barstow declared, rubbing his hands with satisfaction.

"What was it?" Inez asked. "Do not keep us any longer in suspense."

"I expect to forever lose your friendship when I confess what I said. True, he fell into the trap blindly, but you cannot forgive my presumption."

"We will forgive everything at this moment," said Inez, who had been wrought up to a nervous state.

"Then you shall hear, but, hearing, I pray that you will forgive. In answer to Mellough's last words I exclaimed: 'Then it is to Don Ramon's you must go, for Donna Inez is my promised wife!'"

The colonel's words struck forcibly, but less so than would have been the case had he been an urgent suitor. Donna Inez had never suspected his fancy for her; what Don Ramon knew we have already seen.

Barstow expected to see his plan fail, and upon Victoria's face a look of dissatisfaction appeared; but Inez at once cried:

"Bravo! you have done well, Colonel Barstow."

"But," remonstrated Don Ramon, "this will

give rise to unpleasant rumors which will annoy us all. This soldier will tell his companions, they will tell the citizens, and in a short time every one will be saying that you two are engaged."

The donna's expression changed. She had not looked so far herself, and the thought disgusted her.

"We can deny it when this trouble is over," she said, after a pause.

"Or, better still, I will hasten to Mellough and bid him remain silent," said the colonel, quickly.

Even Don Ramon hesitated, with the matter presented in such a light, and then his scruples against taking part in a plot to destroy such documents came again to the front, and he hesitated some time before yielding.

What man, however, can long resist the temptation to destroy evidence which will prove him guilty of a crime of which he is innocent?

Don Ramon yielded at last, and then Barstow left the *casa* and hurried toward the village, to invite Lieutenant Mellough to take up his residence at the house.

"The first step is won!" he was exultantly thinking, "and another will be gained when all Nuevo Madrid is saying that Inez is my betrothed. Oh! Mellough will keep the secret well—so well that all the people will have a chance to help him. But will the last act in the drama be as successful as the first? My faith is small, but by my life, I'll win or ruin!"

And the plotter strode on with a thoughtful frown on his face, anxious to at once install Mellough at the *casa*, but with a great deal still on his busy mind.

A born plotter, he was now playing his deepest game.

CHAPTER XXI.

CAPTAIN PETERS REAPPEARS.

BARSTOW went straight to the hotel, where the leader of the soldiers had taken quarters, but as the blue-coats had not come in from their expedition, he found that he would have to wait awhile.

Consequently he took his way to the bar-room and sat down at one of the tables. A glance around the place showed him, as he thought, that the room was empty, except for himself and the bar-keeper; but in thus thinking he made a mistake.

It will be remembered that Long Haired Max had stationed Tim Foley to watch the prison and see that Eduardo Castro was not spirited away, and this work had been done from the bar room, as the most favorable point.

After a while, however, Tim saw Barstow advancing toward the hotel, and he promptly sought one corner and laid down on the bench, where he was concealed by the table.

Just what the Irishman expected to occur he did not know, but he had a presentiment that important events were afoot—and he was not long kept in doubt.

Barstow, sitting alone, ordered drink and fell into thought. He had exerted himself a good deal in his interview with the Victorias, for it was no easy matter to approach them so as to create a favorable impression, and he was now willing to rest and think.

Habit, however, had made him cautious, and when the door of the saloon opened, he looked up quickly.

A tall, angular, homely man had entered, a person who moved with a rolling gait which spoke of the sea, but that much was not needed for Barstow to recognize him.

The new-comer was Captain Peters, of the schooner *Water Witch*, and the two men had met too often for the colonel to be at fault.

Plainly, the Yankee captain had not expected to see a familiar face, for he looked curiously about, but a curse from Barstow directed his gaze that way.

Then he advanced with a beaming face.

"By thunder! how be yew, colonel!" he said.

"I'm proper glad tew see yew—"

"What in the fiend's name has brought you to Nuevo Madrid?" demanded Barstow, hotly.

"Is the schooner off the coast?"

"No; she's anchored in a little bay near the nose of Lower California," explained Peters, who was surprised at such a greeting. "We was struck by a squall an' nigh about wrecked, an' as 'twas, we sprung a leak, an' had tew put intew ther harbor as I said. The damage ain't much—the boys can handle it themselves—an' as I thought we would be late if we went on down tew port arter repairs, I thought it best tew let her lie where she was till wanted, an' I took a run down here."

"Did you tell them to remain until your return?"

"No; they was tew wait two days, arter which Turner was tew run her down here."

Barstow ground out a furious exclamation.

"What's the matter?" Peters asked, in consternation.

"Only last night I started a messenger to warn you not to come near Nuevo Madrid."

"Thunder! what's up?"

"The town is full of soldiers, and if that infernal Turner goes to signaling off the coast, it

may lead to our ruin, or, at least, the schooner will be connected with this political hubbub."

"What in durnation dew you mean?" demanded the captain, impatiently. "What soldiers are here, an' what be they arter?"

"It is a political affair; nothing that need worry us, of course, if they don't get their eyes on the schooner; but it will put a stop to our work for a while."

"I'm sorry o' that, fur I want tew fill up my pockets while the lamp holds out tew burn. Tell ye what 'tis, it's mighty nice tew be gettin' rich, ain't it?"

"The *Water Witch* must be stopped," said Barstow, abruptly. "Once let suspicion be directed toward the *Black League*, and we'll go to ruin, perhaps. Turner isn't so sharp as you are, and if he signals and don't get an answer, he'll burn his lights all night, or, worse still, come ashore in a boat."

"He must be stopped," Peters agreed.

"How can it be done? You can't tell within twenty-four hours when that blockhead will bring the schooner up—still, why growl? The past can't be undone, and we will try to weather the gale."

During this conversation, the two rascals had spoken in a subdued voice, and as no one except the barkeeper was visible in the room, they believed themselves safe.

It would have been a disagreeable surprise for them, and none the less so for Tim Foley, had they known that he was lying on the bench where he could hear every word.

When the Irishman recognized the captain of the *Water Witch*, he had uttered one subdued exclamation, and then nestled down in a most uncomfortable mood.

He was a brave man, this ex-sailor, but of all men living he most feared Jabez Peters. From his vessel he had deserted, and that, to the honest Tim, seemed a great sin.

"Howly Pater!" he thought feverishly, "he will smill me out, an' drag me back to the schooner, wid oirons on me wrists!"

The captain's olfactory gifts did not prove so keen as Tim supposed, however, and the pair uttered their dangerous secrets unconscious that eager ears were drinking in every word they said.

"Begorra! an' it's a foine couple dhey be!" thought Tim, as his courage increased. "Now jist lit thim tell phat particular branch av villainy they dale in, an' it's a vote av thanks we'll offer thim!"

Unluckily for the listener, they did nothing of the kind, and though it was clearly proved that Barstow was an ally of Peters in his mysterious work, that work remained as much of a secret as ever.

In the midst of the conversation the door suddenly opened, and Long-Haired Max entered.

His arrival brought a frown to the colonel's face, but the captain of the schooner looked actually alarmed. He could not fail to recognize his late passenger, and as he had been in an anxious mood ever since the events of that night recorded at the beginning of our story, he saw danger loom up more ominously than ever.

It will be remembered that he had at first refused to receive the cavalier as a passenger. This was because he knew Barstow would storm if he heard of such a piece of folly. Max, however, offered such a sum for passage-money that the villainous captain accepted the offer, resolving to murder Max when well out at sea.

Warned by Tim Foley, the cavalier disappeared, and from that moment Peters was deeply troubled. How much knowledge had been gained by Max and Tim? He did not know, but their flight was proof that they had learned something, and he expected a revelation to follow.

Not daring to confess to the colonel, he had made no mention of his passenger, but on seeing him in the saloon he was seized with alarm.

At the very least, Barstow would learn of his folly, which amounted in a certain degree to treachery.

Tim Foley in his ambush, grew still more interested and uttered a subdued exclamation.

"Howly Pater!"

Long-Haired Max halted abruptly on seeing the pair at the table, and in the fact that they were together he saw a verification of all he had before learned.

Whatever was the mystery of the *Water Witch*, Colonel Barstow was at the bottom of it.

One moment the cavalier hesitated, and then, obeying a sudden impulse, he strode forward to the table and held out his hand to Peters.

"My dear captain, how do you do?" he said, warmly, "I'm delighted to see you!"

The perspiration began to roll off of the captain's body, for he saw Barstow's terrible gaze flashing from his face to Baldwin's and back again, and the look of agony on his face was not reassuring to his ally's own fears.

Still, he put out his hand as though in a dream.

"This is an unexpected pleasure," continued the cavalier. "What brought you to Nuevo Madrid?"

"A—a horse!" stammered Peters.

"Indeed! then where is the *Water Witch*?"

Peters cowered before Barstow's look and expected an attack on his own person, but he could not know that the colonel was almost as much disturbed.

"Where has he seen Peters?—what does he know of the *Water Witch*?" the chief plotter was wondering.

The last question was so startling that he did not dare to trust to his subordinate for an answer.

"Was that the schooner you told me was wrecked?" he asked, looking significantly at Peters.

"The identical same," was the glib reply. "She went down with every man on board."

"You except yourself, I suppose," said Max, with a smile, but still watching keenly.

"Darn it, yes; I wa'n't borned tew be drowned. I got away on a hen-coop."

"I didn't know that you trafficked in poultry."

"I was takin' a sample lot tew 'Frisco,'" said Peters, more guardedly.

During this conversation Max had been using his eyes to good advantage and he had come to the conclusion that Peters was hiding something from Barstow. What was it? Remembering the circumstances under which he secured passage on the schooner, he caught at the truth and smiled grimly at the captain's predicament.

For a moment he was tempted to tell the facts and make trouble between the conspirators, but it suddenly occurred to him that he might possibly work on the captain's fears and use him as an instrument against Barstow.

Perhaps there was but a small chance of success, but he resolved to play into the lesser villain's hands and see what would come of it.

The experiment was worth trying.

CHAPTER XXII.

AN OFFER REFUSED.

"WELL, I didn't suppose when you sailed out of Callao that I would never see the schooner again," Max said, carelessly.

Peters caught at the straw and his face grew brighter. He was keen-witted enough to see that Max intended to play into his hands, and that meant a reprieve from Barstow's wrath, but that same discernment made him duly cautious.

"The ocean is treach'rous," he observed.

"This man has told me his adventures at full length, during the shipwreck," said the colonel, who did not suspect that he was being tricked, "and it is surprising to see what a man can endure. Do you intend to remain in Nuevo Madrid, my man?"

At this point Peters received a kick from Barstow's boot and he knew it meant something, but to save his life he could not tell which way he was to answer.

"I reckon I'll start a saloon," he said, at a venture.

He had made a mistake.

"In Nuevo Madrid?" demanded the colonel, in a voice not to be mistaken.

"Here? Lord bless you! I guess not. No, sirree; Callao is the place. But, see here, gents, I've got tew leave you. I'm e'na'most worn out un'-I'm goin' tew my room."

Peters spoke with considerable emphasis, for his nature was by no means a cowardly one and he resented the kick on his shin, while his own blunder angered him, and he resolved to break off the interview before the situation became more complicated.

"Have another drink," said Barstow, trying to catch his attention.

"Nary drink," replied the captain, brusquely; and he went out of the room slamming the door behind him.

With the barkeeper busy over his bottles and Tim Foley cautiously peering over the table, Max and Barstow were left alone, face to face.

They looked at each other for a moment in silence, subdued hostility in each face. Their situation was peculiar for such deadly enemies, and weaker men would have failed to remain calm, but they were strong, cool, self-reliant. Max expected to crush the colonel the moment his witnesses arrived; the colonel, relying on his wealth and worldly position to crush any mere charge, did not intend that those witnesses should live to reach Nuevo Madrid.

He also intended something more which will be explained further on.

"Well," said Max, breaking the silence, "are you here to see me?"

"I am not," was the prompt reply.

"Isn't it about time to hand in your answer?"

"You received that when you visited me."

"Knowing what I do, sir, I advise you to reverse your decision. I am not a man to be trifled with, and I am going to push my case through to the end."

The colonel made a gentle gesture.

"My dear sir, I don't doubt your zeal, but as I class you as a Don Quixote, I do not see why I should get excited. Your little fiction would make you answerable under a charge of blackmail were we at the East, but as it is I propose to let you go right on just as I would any other harmless lunatic."

The bland, oily tones did not wholly conceal a sarcastic inflection, but the cavalier's lip curled scornfully.

"So you think I am harmless," he said.

"Oh, yes."

"Well, sir, as I am not yet ready to convince you to the contrary, I shall not rave now and here to shake your opinion. Yet, you must believe me a pitiable coward to forget a father's blood. I have sworn to have vengeance and it shall be mine."

With these words Max abruptly arose and went to one side, and Barstow made no attempt to renew the conversation. He took a drink and left the saloon, and then Tim Foley came out of his hiding-place. He had not remained there through cowardice, but he would not interrupt while matters were quiet. He had held a revolver ready for use, but he replaced it as he arose to view.

"Howly Pater!" he said, as he went to the cavalier's side, "it's meself expected a riot. Whin I saw you an' dhe ould captain a lookin' at 'ach ither I said, to meself, 'Dhere will be a did mon here in dhe twenking av an oiye.' Begorra, yez hev a poile av nerve."

"It would have been madness to quarrel. I want to give these men plenty of line until I can land them. When I face Barstow I feel like springing upon him with hands outstretched for his throat, but I must bide my time. Until my witnesses are here I can do nothing."

Tim hastened to tell what he had heard before the cavalier's arrival, and then the latter resolved to see Peters at once. The captain had retired to his room, and as no time was like the present Max went up without delay.

He found his man in a chair at the window, smoking furiously, but his welcome was not cordial.

"I've dropped in on a little matter of business, captain," Max blandly said.

"Um! Wal, set down."

"You owe me one for protecting you when in the saloon," said Max, as he obeyed.

"Fur protectin' me?"

The captain looked at his visitor with a mixture of defiance and fear, but back of all was a dogged look which told that he was preparing for a struggle. His sharp, cunning face betrayed a keenness not easily defeated under equal circumstances, but with the odds so terribly against him he was uneasy even while stubbornly firm.

"Yes. I refer to the fact that I did not reveal to Barstow that I was once a passenger on the Water Witch."

"What in thunder has he got tew dew about it?" demanded Peters, in assumed surprise.

"A good deal. Come, captain, don't seek to play with me. I know more about you than you think. Do you suppose I am ignorant of the red light on the cliff, the twin lights of the schooner or the nice little game you and Barstow are playing?"

The small, furtive eyes of the son of the sea wavered perceptibly, but the dogged look did not leave his face.

"What the blazes be you drivin' at?" he demanded. "I ain't playin' no game, I never saw Barstow till tew-day an' I don't know nothin' about no lights."

"Possible? Perhaps you will also assert that the Water Witch is at the bottom of the ocean?"

"So she is."

"Wrong, Jabez, wrong. She did encounter a bit of wind, but, instead of sinking, she is safely anchored in a miniature harbor down the coast."

Peters changed color under his deep bronze.

"You're a darned liar!" he cried, striking the table angrily.

"Softly, captain, softly. I am not a man to be irritated with impunity, for I know too much about you. Had you refused my money at Callao, all would have been well, but you trod on my toes and vexed me when you planned to throw me to the fishes that dark night off the coast. I walked out of the schooner as you remember, but I thought you worth looking after, and, lo! I stumbled on your game with Barstow."

During this speech Peters had been greatly excited. His small eyes seemed to almost emit sparks of fire, his face worked nervously and his breath came through his set teeth with a hissing sound. Max, though he had gone on steadily with his remarks, expected to see him either leap forward or fall in a fit.

The captain did neither. Instead, he burst into a laugh, but it was a forced, unmusical sound.

"Wal, by gosh! you're the champion liar!" he said.

Long-Haired Max leaned forward over the table and looked him steadily in the eyes.

"Captain Peters, this is folly," he said, steadily. "I have come here to offer you a chance to clear your skirts from the peril which now menaces the Black League, to desert a sinking ship. Colonel Barstow is doomed, just as sure as the sun rises and sets. He is near the end of his present rope; very near that of another rope which dangles from the gallows. In all probability, he will take other men with him in his downfall. Beware, sir, that you are not one of

them. To-day, I offer you a chance to turn against this man who is the chief of the Black Brethren, and I swear that you shall go free if you confess; to-morrow, your chance may be forever gone!"

This speech, which was delivered earnestly, warningly but never harshly, would have moved a more cowardly man to weakness, but Long-Haired Max did not know the Yankee skipper.

Villain that he was, he was not made of cowardly or traitorous material.

He was, however, sufficiently impressed by the amount of knowledge which Max seemed to possess to be stung to desperation. He resolved to kill his companion then and there, trusting to Barstow to save him from punishment.

Slyly he reached for his revolver, and when it was fairly drawn he proposed to essay the attempt of cocking and firing it at one and the same time.

The result proved that he had not correctly measured his enemy.

Just a trifle before he was ready for work, up came the cavalier's own hand, holding a gleaming revolver, and the muzzle was thrust within a few inches of the captain's face.

"Put your hands above your head!" said the cavalier, with a calmness which did not conceal the threatening inflection back of all.

Peters was not a fool; he recognized the mettle of his adversary and obeyed the order with a groan.

"I will relieve you of your weapon," continued Max, blandly; and he at once appropriated the revolver.

"Wal, must I say my prayers?" sullenly asked Peters.

"I have a faint recollection of a passage in literature which says that the prayers of the wicked shall avail nothing. Better use your breath by making a clean breast of all I wish to know."

"I'll be darned if I dew!" snarled the skipper. "Yew may shoot me, but not a word will yew git out o' my head!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE ALCALDE ASSERTS HIS RIGHTS.

A LONG pause ensued. Long-Haired Max at last comprehended the material of which his companion was made and he knew a rack would scarcely have power to wrest the skipper's secrets from him.

From that moment he had abandoned the attempt, but he was looking forward to the future. Plainly, Peters would tell Barstow of the new turn of affairs, and the latter would be stirred to a dangerous degree when he learned that the secrets of the Black League were known to his enemies.

Could this revelation be prevented? So far as the colonel's wrath was concerned Max had no fear, but, once warned, he might take precautions which would save the mysterious Black Brethren from discovery. The Water Witch was on her way up the coast, but Barstow believed that Max thought her at the bottom of the ocean.

Was there any way to keep him in ignorance? While Max meditated, Peters gained fresh courage and prepared for an attempt at escaping his present predicament.

Suddenly he bounded to his feet, hurling the table against the cavalier, and the force of the shock sent the revolver flying across the room.

Another moment and the two men were locked in a close but by no means friendly embrace.

Max had been taken by surprise or he would not have lost his revolver, but he went into the fight without any fear of the long-armed skipper. He might be a bad opponent, but Max Baldwin had fought too many such battles to tremble before a single man.

Back and forth they struggled in that close grip, each exerting himself to the utmost, but for a long while no perceptible advantage was gained. Both were strong and skillful, and each kept his feet without great trouble.

Peters, however, had no desire to achieve a bloodless victory. Nothing short of Baldwin's life would satisfy him, and as he remembered that he had a knife inside his coat, he set to work to draw it.

Finally he succeeded, and then nothing was needed except one straight, outward lunge; but, unluckily for Jabez, his enemy had not been oblivious of his movements, and just as he was ready for the lunge his wrist was caught by an iron hand.

The incident excited both, though no word was spoken, and they redoubled their efforts so much that, as they neared the table, which had before been knocked over, they did not observe it until the captain's heels struck and they went crashing upon it, breaking the frail concern into a shapeless mass.

At the moment of falling the cavalier had remembered the knife, which was still held between them, and he had experienced a fear that the blade would penetrate his body, but no such accident occurred, and he looked to the skipper.

The latter did not stir, but lay motionless amid the ruins of the table, and Max was not

long in perceiving that the knife had been turned about, and was buried in his body.

"By Judas! he is dead!" the cavalier muttered.

Such did indeed seem to be the fact, but when he recovered his wits sufficiently to make an examination he found that he was neither dead nor fatally wounded. He had a bad cut in his side, one which would evidently keep him in bed for at least two weeks, but his insensibility was caused by a blow on his head, which had struck the floor forcibly.

Max reflected quickly. Peters was supposed to be a stranger in Nuevo Madrid, and he resolved to keep him where he would not be able to communicate with Barstow—an easy task, he believed, since the latter would not dare to insist on removing him from any refuge in which they might place him.

Forming his plan, Max went down to Tim and told him all that had occurred, bidding him hasten to Alcalde Jones with the story, and also the plan he had formed.

Then he returned to the skipper's room, and proceeded to dress his wound as well as was possible. It had bled freely, but not dangerously, and he knew the man would not die unless it was through his own folly; if he kept quietly in bed all would be well.

The alcalde and his men came more quickly than he had expected, and the wounded man was conveyed to the official's own house and comfortably arranged in a room over the office. Two men, upon whom Jones could rely, were placed over him as combined nurses and jailers, and then, as he showed signs of returning consciousness, Max descended to the office.

Strictly speaking, they had not proceeded according to law, but in border towns forms and ceremonies count for but little and their plan must be carried through if possible.

Above all, Peters and Barstow must not be allowed to talk privately.

At the end of half an hour, Jones rejoined Max and reported that the wounded man had recovered his senses but remained too weak to leave his bed.

"I've tole ther critter who I be," continued the alcalde, "an' he said he was right glad ter be in such hands, but ther durnation critter had a wishful look in his eyes an' I reckon he is wishin' he might see Barstow; but he dassent ask for him. Hel hel!"

His honor laughed merrily, but at that moment Max chanced to look through the door and see Lieutenant Mellough approaching with five of his men. He mentioned the fact to Jones, who scowled fiercely.

"I reckon ther p'ison varmint has got some new ijee in his noddle, but he don't want ter air it too freely in this hyar tabernacle. I won't hev no familiarity while I set in ther boodwah o' jestic!"

His honor spoke with unusual emphasis, and it was evident that he was prepared to defend his rights while the American eagle flapped its wings over California soil.

Mellough reached the door, entered and looked surprised at seeing Max.

"You're just the man I want," he brusquely said.

"Indeed! In what way can I be of service to you?"

Max spoke calmly and politely, for though he suspected what was coming he had no wish to quarrel with one who wore United States blue.

"I have come to arrest you!" said the lieutenant, in the same offensive way.

"Possible? And for what reason?"

"If it isn't murder, it isn't your fault. I have heard of the fight at the hotel and I am obliged to take you into custody."

Up to this point the alcalde had listened in silence, but his wrath grew with each passing moment, and at this point he pushed to the front. His left arm was akimbo, while his right was outstretched toward Mellough and each one of his long, bony fingers was transformed into a menacing pointer.

"Hole on, thar, hole on!" he solemnly said. "It strikes me you are gettin' inter ther wrong paw. What in thunder hev you got ter do with ther hotel affair?"

"I am the military commander of this district."

"Precisely. You hev gi'n ther proper definition o' your persition an' I hope as how you'll stick to it, rememberin' that I am at the head o' ther jewrispudence o' jestic. Ther case now in hand, ther scrimmage of this hyar proximo, is my business, not yourn!"

"I'll show you whose business it is!" sputtered the little lieutenant. "I've got forty soldiers at my back, and I won't allow a criminal to escape."

"Hole on, thar, hole on! Do you accuse me o' allowin' any criminal ter escape?"

"It looks a good deal like it."

"All things look alike ter a blind man, an' that's what you must be; but I warn ye, mister, not ter accuse ther alcalde an' mayor o' this hyar city o' any complicity with criminals. Remember, sir, you stand in ther boodwah o' jestic!"

Jones made a sweeping gesture around the office.

"I didn't intend to accuse you," said Mellough, less belligerently, "but as a murder has been committed, it is my duty to arrest the assassin—this man!"

He pointed to Long-Haired Max.

"Hole on, thar, hole on! Your statistics ain't wuth an oita," declared the alcalde, and his manner was impressive, though his hold on the word "oita" was less firm. "In the fust place thar ain't be'n no murder; in ther next place ther wounded man war ther culprit, afore an' arter ther fact; an' in ther third place, it are a case fur my jurisprudence."

"It's my business to investigate."

"It's your business ter clear out o' hyar an' mind your own business!" roared Jones. "Durnation wildcats! do you think I can't run my own circus? I'll be hanged ef I don't whether I kin or not, an' I'll hang on ter ther boodwah o' justice as long as the American eagle has a tail-feather left in her quiver!"

The two men glared at each other in great wrath; but though Max felt inclined to laugh, he believed he saw in this demand on Mellough's part the hand of Colonel Barstow.

"I have no intention of leaving town, if that is what you fear," he said, addressing the lieutenant. "If you will allow me to tell my story I think you will agree that there is no case against me."

"I reckon as how that would be in order," said the alcalde, himself growing calmer before so pacific a speech. "Look at him keerfully, lieutenant, an' see ef you kin see a sign o' guilt in his eagle eye."

Max related what had occurred at the hotel, telling about the fight exactly as it was, but arranging the motive to suit himself.

Whatever purpose was actuating Mellough, he was wise enough to see that Max held the advantage for the time, and he moderated his language a good deal even while still affirming his right to have charge of the wounded man.

In so doing he very well knew that he was going beyond his powers. He had been sent to Nuevo Madrid simply to look after the alleged conspirators, and as the town had not been placed under military control, and no demand existed for such a step, he knew he would not be upheld in taking the wounded man by force. Seeing in Alcalde Jones an uneducated man, he had believed that he could overawe him, but, instead, he found him as firm as a rock.

Convinced at last that his labors were useless, he abandoned his claim and the field as gracefully as he could and marched his men back to their quarters.

"We hev won another round," said Mr. Jones, mopping his face, "but I'll be durned ef this ain't weakenin' ter ther system. I never see'd nothin' like et afore, but I'll preside over this hyar boodwah ef I have ter send fur a howitzer an' set myself up fur a Robespierre. I'm sorry ther enemy hev possession o' ther Bastille, but ef hostilities continue I'll draft every citizen o' ther town an' lead 'em ag'in' them frownin' walls like a second Jean Darcy!"

Max smiled faintly at the thought of the alcalde in the role of the Maid of Orleans, but, dismissing all historical precedents, he stated his belief that Barstow was still the power behind the throne.

If the colonel had heard that his ally was wounded, nothing was more natural than that he should desire to get him into his own hands, so that only his own ears should receive any confession which might result from the terrors of dissolution.

"Your ideas are c'reck," the alcalde said, "an' they strengthen my zeal. We will hang onto this hyar Cap'n Kidd, or whatever his name is, an', mebbe, we shall be able ter play some durnation big trumps in ther game bimeby."

"I need not caution you to be extremely careful in regard to what you say and do; the enemy must not suspect how much we know. We have several cases on hand, and all must be brought to a crisis at once. The Water Witch is on her way down the coast and we must look out for her; the witnesses who are to prove that Barstow killed my father must be saved from his trap; and we must prove what I know to be the case—the arch-plotter is mixed up with this conspiracy case. All these things we must look out for, you know."

"We must an' will. Ther men I hev gi'n you fur ther work are sharp an' loyal, an' what they find shall be recorded hyar whar I sit like Brutus did at ther trial o' Cromwell—like a Gibraltar!"

So said the alcalde, and Max knew he was reliable in the present case, though a little confused in regard to matters of history.

Leaving him, the cavalier went in search of Tim Foley, from whom he learned that there had indeed been an interview between Barstow and Mellough; the colonel had hastened to the prison soon after the wounded man was removed from the hotel, and then Mellough at once took his men and went to the alcalde's office.

"Again the plotter shows his hand," thought Max, "and unless I am much mistaken we will yet have him fast."

CHAPTER XXIV.

INEZ VISITS THE JAIL.

THAT night Lieutenant Mellough slept in the casa of Don Ramon Victoria, where he took particular pains to impress upon their minds the fact that he would have refused the invitation had he not been told that Donna Inez was betrothed to Colonel Barstow.

"A military man cannot be too careful," he said, "and when I came here I resolved not to tarry in any house, for fear I would be accused of partiality; but since you are a Spaniard, and the senorita is to be the wife of an American, my course is proper. As for Donna Inez, I admire her choice in selecting Colonel Barstow as her future husband."

He bowed low to the lady, who blushed perceptibly, but it was with annoyance rather than with modesty; she did not love, nor even like, the colonel, and it was painful to hear her name mentioned in connection with his.

Ah! little did she know that already, thanks to Barstow's plot, the engagement was discussed in every house and *ja ale* of Nuevo Madrid; the most miserable and degraded of the village beggars were saying that she was to be Barstow's wife.

Don Ramon believed Mellough's scruples somewhat unnatural and absurd, but he had yielded to the course of events, and thought only of destroying the papers which would speak against him.

Barstow had urged that nothing should be done hastily, and the soldier was left alone that night—a night during which Barstow slept but little. Ever since he had heard of the stabbing of Peters he had been in a fever of alarm. Report said the skipper was seriously injured, and liable to die; and, as Max had suspected, it was he who had sent Mellough to the alcalde's office.

Barstow had good reason for fear, for Peters held many dangerous secrets, and one word from him concerning the mysterious business of the Water Witch would ruin the chief plotter.

Long after he should have been in bed, the master of the castle-house paced his room, cursing and bewailing alternately. Would Peters speak? While the skipper had a hope of life, he would undoubtedly remain firm, but rare, indeed, are the cases where the human mind does not waver when the footsteps of Death sound beside his bed.

Weakness of body begets weakness of mind. With the coming of day Barstow's courage increased, and a visit to the village convinced him that he was still safe.

Such being the case, he went to Casa Victoria to put in motion another stage of his scheme.

Finding Inez alone, he soon broached the subject.

"It has occurred to me, Donna Inez," he said, in a grave but kindly manner, "that it would be an excellent idea for you to visit the jail and see Eduardo Castro. That wayward young man has it in his power to clear Don Ramon from all suspicion, but he has thus far preserved a sullen silence. He eats voraciously, but not a word passes his lips. Threats are certainly powerless in his case; but would it be so with entreaties duly used? Cannot you, Donna Inez, who have been his friend, touch his heart so that he will save your father?"

Inez started. Up to that moment she had been but a minor actor in the drama; she had heard and seen almost passively; but she had the will and strength of mind to aid when a chance was shown her.

Barstow's project looked so fair on its face that she caught at it at once.

"I will try!" she cried, with energy. "No harm can come of it; I will try!"

No harm! Barstow smiled under his mustache, and, having said that they would be compelled to wait until evening, since Mellough was away, and they could not enter without his leave, he finished his call, and went down to the village.

Once there, he sought one of the blue-coats who had remained at the village.

"Did Lieutenant Mellough see you before he went away?" he asked.

"Yes, colonel."

"And told you to implicitly obey my directions?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well; you shall now learn what is required of you. First, let me give you this money."

He placed a twenty-dollar gold piece in the man's hands.

"Will that secure your aid and bind you to eternal silence?" he asked.

"You bet it will, colonel," was the prompt reply.

"Very well; now hear what I want. This evening I shall call here accompanied by a young lady who will visit the prisoner, Castro. Once inside, you must pretend to become suspicious and arrest me, also to turn the key on the girl and keep her until she is on the verge of hysterics. After that, you are to release her; but I to be held somewhat longer, and when I go it will to all appearances be by escaping through my prison window."

The soldier could not see exactly what Barstow was driving at, but he agreed to all, and then Barstow proceeded to give further directions.

Soon after dark the colonel went to Casa Victoria, and Inez, quietly leaving the house without a word to any one, joined him, and they went together to the village.

All the girl's thoughts were centered on her hopes of prevailing on Eduardo to clear her father, and as she had often done him favors it seemed as though he must do so.

They reached the jail and passed through the outer door, where they were confronted by Barstow's tool.

"I wish to see Lieutenant Mellough," said Barstow.

"He is not here," was the surly reply.

"Not here? That is bad. I wish to see your prisoner, or at least, I wish this lady admitted to his cell."

"It can't be did."

"But she is Castro's cousin."

"Just the reason why she should not go in. I know you are all right, but I don't let any other person in."

Inez was greatly disappointed, and she undertook to urge her own cause, but the soldier remained firm.

Finally, Barstow spoke as though actuated by a sudden idea.

"See here, my man," he cried, "this lady is my future wife, and I hold myself responsible for this visit."

Inez started. Once more she heard this odious statement made, but she was almost pleased at what she thought Barstow's quick wit when the soldier gave way in a seemingly reluctant manner.

She was led to a barred iron door, but this was speedily unfastened, and she passed through and found herself alone with Eduardo Castro.

Barstow had accompanied her only to the door, and as soon as she was inside he whispered a few words to the soldier and then left the jail.

Outside he found Buck Egan, his faithful bravo, awaiting him.

"How is it?" he asked anxiously. "Have you prepared everything?"

"All's serene," the fellow answered. "Ther boyees er on hand, an' all thet's necessary is fur ther gal ter walk inter ther trap."

"Very good; don't forget my directions."

The colonel turned back toward the jail in an exultant mood, but he had not gone many steps when he saw two men looking toward the west with an intentness which caused him to walk toward them.

"It's durned queer," said one.

"Can't make it out," added the other.

"What is it?" Barstow asked.

"Hello, colonel, are it you? Jest look out over ther water will yer, an' tell us what them p'int's o' light be. Looks ter me like a light from a vessel, but that seems ter be two colors—red an' green. They run together a bit from this distance, but ther case is so curious that I war jest telling Tom we orter go ter ther alcalde an' ask him ef they ain't Greaser ships connected wi' this 'ere conspiracy."

Had Barstow heard the conclusion of this speech he would have spoken against any such movement, but from the time the man mentioned a light at sea he had ceased to hear.

Looking toward the designated point he, too, saw the twin lights, and well he knew the cause thereof.

The Water Witch was off Nuevo Madrid—worse, she was signaling for her fellow-conspirators!

A terrible oath fell from Barstow's lips, and without stopping to think how strange his course would seem, he rushed away toward the water. The schooner must be warned, whatever the cost.

Her appearance at that time was indeed calculated to alarm him, and he continued to curse and to run toward the water. He believed he had taken precautions which would keep the schooner away from that locality for a time, but, somehow, the message had not gone as he wished.

It was not until he had passed the village that he remembered the part that he was to play in the plot against Inez, and then he paused as suddenly as though shot.

For a while his mind was torn by conflicting emotions and he knew not what to do. His presence was imperatively demanded in two places at once, but, as he could only fill one vacancy, which must he abandon?

In his wrath he cursed the present commander of the schooner most soundly, unconsciously that a man was crouching a few steps away and listening to every word, yet this man, who was Tim Foley, seemed well satisfied with the situation.

"Come what may, the schooner must be saved!" finally exclaimed the colonel, and then he ran down to the beach, launched a boat and pulled furiously toward the ocean light.

Close behind him, following like a shadow, came a second boat; its occupant was Tim Foley.

CHAPTER XXV.

HOW BUCK EAGAN SUCCEEDED.

EVER since his capture, so far as Long-Haired Max, Alcalde Jones or the Victorias knew, Eduardo Castro had preserved an utter silence. Certainly, he had never spoken before any of them, and the soldiers said it was always the same.

When Inez Victoria was ushered into the cell, as before related, she had a view of a human figure which crouched in one corner of the cell, which was entirely empty except for a rude bed, looking more like a brute in its den than like a man.

Yet, in spite of the fact that his face was hidden, and that the light was poor, she recognized Castro.

The iron door clanged to with a dismal sound, but the prisoner did not stir. Inez felt her heart begin to throb with strange rapidity. Never before had she been in such a dismal place, and she did not wonder that her cousin, thus confined, had grown so sullen and discouraged.

Her heart became filled with pity. Poor Eduardo; whatever his faults, he was her cousin. Once, he had been her playmate, and time had not effaced all the bright scenes before his dissipation led him on down the fatal road where sin and folly are the beacon lights.

She advanced and laid her hand on his shoulder.

"Eduardo!"

The single word did what it was said persuasions and threats had up to that time been powerless to do; it brought the prisoner to his feet at one bound.

All his old comeliness and neatness seemed to have vanished. He looked old, haggard and miserable.

"You here!" he ejaculated.

"Yes, Eduardo, I am here. At last I am able to assure you of my sympathy—to tell you that—"

He put out his hand to stop her, and then sat down on the floor, dropped his head on his knees, and seemed to say by so significant a movement that he would say no more. She saw too that some sort of manacles held his wrists.

She called him by name and he did not answer. She spoke again, but he remained silent. She made an affecting plea, and he did not stir a muscle, so far as she could see.

Her pity began to give way to anger, but as she remembered for what she was working, she kept steadily on, reminding him of the bright years of the past, and trying in every way to touch him.

Plainly, he was not at all affected, for when he raised his head, after a while, he looked very composed and spoke coldly.

"Caramba! you are determined to worry me to death or accomplish your purpose. Well, what is it? You did not come here because of love or pity for me; you have some other motive. What is it?"

His brusqueness was not at all promising, but Inez was not in a position where she could afford to be particular.

"I wish to speak of this crime of which you are accused."

"Crime!" he repeated, fiercely. "And is it a crime to attempt to restore to Mexico what was wrested from her by an invader's bayonets? Since when did patriotism become a crime?"

"Forgive me, Eduardo, forgive me!" said Donna Inez, almost weeping. "Why will you be so cruel, when I am your friend?"

"Let it pass. Speak on!" he said, with the same brusqueness.

"Eduardo, you are, you must be, innocent!"

"I have done that of which they accuse me. If that be guilt, I am not innocent."

"I am sorry for you, Eduardo."

"Bah! I tell you it was not for my sake you came. I am no fool. For what reason, then, did you come? Have these devils of Americans planted their foot on the haughty neck of my potent uncle?"

His manner convinced Inez that mild words were indeed thrown away on him. If she talked at all, it must be in a business-like way.

"My father is accused," she said.

"Naturally."

"Yet he is innocent!" she cried, excitedly.

"As innocent as I am, and just as guilty."

"Eduardo, he was not concerned in this plot!"

"Pardon me, but he was, and the papers those dogs stole from me will prove it. I don't care a fig for my uncle; I wish these Americans had the habit of using the block and ax; but I would like to tear those soldiers limb from limb, every one of them!"

The prisoner wound up with a torrent of abuse which may well go unrecorded, but, taken together with his terrible looks, made a whole before which Donna Inez cowered.

Was it indeed her old playmate?

"Eduardo!—oh, my cousin!" she faintly murmured.

"Well, you want to know of Don Ramon Victoria. What of him?"

"You said he was guilty; oh! take back those words; take them back!"

Donna Inez sunk on her knees and lifted her

clasped hands, and for the first time Castro showed some signs of emotion.

"I almost wish I could comfort you, for you have always helped me, but what can I do. Don Ramon has been with us from the start, he has been the brains of the project while I have been the hands. He planned; I executed. Had the work not been nipped in the bud, he would have been a leader in the field. All this I tell you because the accused soldiers have irrefragable proof. I can do nothing; I cannot even save myself."

This declaration, made in the most solemn of tones, fell on Donna Inez with crushing force, and for a moment she believed what he said; but as she remembered that from her childhood, even before the war which gave California to the United States, she had heard her father express his admiration for the northern country, she wavered no longer.

"It is false, false!" she cried.

Eduardo shrugged his shoulders.

"Then I need say no more," he observed, and seating himself against the wall, he took up his old position and remained deaf or heedless to her words.

Everything that she could say was said, but he seemed incapable of being touched, and she had to abandon the attempt at last.

Going to the door, she found it locked; she beat upon it to call the guard and received no attention.

At the end of ten minutes she grew alarmed and hesought Eduardo's aid. He did not stir a muscle. The situation was too much for her composure and she burst into tears, and it was thus that the bribed soldier found her.

He made a profound apology and seemed so sincerely disturbed that she almost forgave him.

"Where is Colonel Barstow?" she asked.

"That is just what I want to know," he said, pulling his mustache viciously.

And he told the truth. According to the pre-arranged plan, the colonel should at that moment have been locked in a cell, but as he had not appeared to fulfill his part of the contract, his tool was wholly at fault.

As the reader already knows, it was the sudden appearance of the Water Witch off the coast which had called the colonel away and disarranged all his plans.

"What do you mean?" Donna Inez asked.

"The kurnel has vanished som'ers," the man replied. "He said he would step out for a breath o' fresh air while you were busy an' he ain't showed up sence."

"Where can he have gone?"

"I'll be durned ef I ain't afeerd summit is wrong," the fellow said.

He told the truth, for he could in no other way account for Barstow's disappearance, but a little thought convinced Donna Inez that she had sustained no great loss. She did not fear to walk to Casa Victoria alone, and the colonel's company was far from agreeable.

Leaving the hotel, she walked rapidly through the village. Few people were abroad, and such as she did meet made no move to address her.

She soon left the village behind and was nearing her home when three men sprung from behind a rock and seized her before she could flee.

Even in the darkness, she saw that they were rough, brutal-looking fellows and she would have cried for help, but they were as quick-witted as she, and a large hand closed over her mouth.

"Quiet and easy, *querida mi!*" one of them cried, with a laugh. "Pretty girls never scream; 'tis the ugly ones who act ugly!"

The amateur philosopher had scarcely uttered the last words before he went forward with one or two quick steps and then dropped in the road; a movement in which he was imitated by the man who held the young lady, who was thus left free.

She, however, did not attempt to flee.

She had seen the cause of the confusion among her enemies in the shape of a young man who had dropped two of them by swift, accurate blows, and his voice rung out clearly:

"This way, Donna Inez; come to my side and I will protect you!"

Even then she recognized the firm, steady voice, and obeying the direction found her hand clasped by that of Long-Haired Max.

"Have no fear; I will protect you!" he again said.

No further time was allowed for words, for the third ruffian, with a bowl of rage, sprung forward as though to demolish the cavalier.

"Aha! how is this, Buck Egan?" laughed the younger man, as he parried a furious blow. "I come up like a ghost at the banquet, don't I?—and you go down!"

At the last word Buck did go down, heavily hit, and with a tremendous shock.

By this time one of the first men was up, but another blow leveled him to stay; and when Egan arose he was saluted with a profusion of those blows which batter without stunning.

Clearly, Long-Haired Max possessed a terrible fist, for two of the trio lay like logs, but it was his fancy to mark Buck thoroughly. This he did, and when he finally knocked him down again, the fellow remained, and in a most damaged condition.

CHAPTER XXVI.

BARSTOW'S TROUBLES.

NATURALLY, the pugilistic encounter had been trying to Donna Inez, but she had not once thought of fleeing. She came of a brave race and her heritage asserted itself even then, and she was filled with admiration for the brave man who had dared odds for her sake and so neatly disposed of the three ruffians.

When the last man was down Long-Haired Max turned to her, lifted his hat and spoke as pleasantly as though nothing unusual had occurred.

"I think we may now go on our way unmolested," he observed.

"Let us go at once. Those fellows may recover their consciousness."

"Hardly, for I hit them to stay, but you will be safer inside Casa Victoria."

"I have again to thank you for your bravery and your championship," said Donna Inez with emotion. "I fear the payment is but slight, but my earnest gratitude is yours."

"It is enough to pay a far greater debt, but I only did my duty. Luckily, I happened along just in time, and it was rather a pleasure to get a chance at those fellows. One of them, at least, is no friend of mine."

"Did you know them?"

"One was Buck Egan."

"Egan?" she repeated with a start.

"Yes."

"Isn't he a servant of Colonel Barstow?"

"The very same, Donna Inez."

Max hoped the conversation would lead to a better understanding between them, but the lady did not speak until they reached the entrance to the Victoria grounds.

Then she aroused with a start.

"I shall be glad to see you at the casa, at any time, Mr. Baldwin," she said. "You have been my champion on several occasions and the Victorias never forget."

He thanked her, but with less warmth than he would have used had she confided her thoughts after hearing that Buck Egan was among the late assailants. Somehow, even when they were the kindest, Donna Inez and her father threw a barrier of pride, dignity or something else in his path. Had he been invited to the house on this occasion, it is likely he would have abandoned his resolution not to make them confidants in his war against Colonel Barstow.

Still, the invitation was not given, and he bade her good-night and hastened toward the village.

"I can't understand this night's work exactly, and I am impressed by the belief that Barstow's plans have gone wrong," he said. "As near as I can judge, it was a scheme by which the plotter hoped to strengthen his hold upon Inez. But how? She went to the jail to see Castro. What was the object? That's what I don't see yet, but Barstow had one. Could he have intended that Buck Egan should abduct her? If so, it is well I followed her from the jail."

While thus reflecting, Max was hurrying back to the village, but he suddenly paused.

He had reached the top of a hill, and, chancing to look out over the water, he saw something which at once interested him.

"The Water Witch, by Judas!" he muttered.

Sure enough the twin lights of the mysterious schooner were visible—not plainly, as from the shore, but sufficiently so to make him positive in the matter.

One moment he looked, and then, breaking into a run, he started at full speed for the water's edge.

In the meanwhile, let us follow Colonel Barstow, whom we left just as he had launched his boat and begun pulling furiously toward the schooner.

The ex-officer was a man of many plots, and he hoped to become enormously rich and very powerful before many weeks, but he was well aware that all his plans would be thrown into chaos if the secrets of the Black League were made public.

Although he was controlling Lieutenant Melrough, he had no taste for military matters. So long as he prospered pecuniarily, he did not care who ruled California; and even had he cared, he would not have engaged in a treasonable enterprise.

As Long-Haired Max had said to him, his title of colonel had not been won on the battle-field; he had always blessed the lucky chance which gave him a good position at the rear, when other men were walking amid bullets; and now he was willing to stand back and let other men do the fighting.

Before money and power, he was willing to bow the knee, and his whole future depended on keeping the secret of the schooner from the world at large.

No pirate ever indulged in more profane language than he as he pulled toward the Water Witch. His wrath fell heavily on the schooner's crew, for they were not only endangering their common secret, but he had been called away from Donna Inez.

He had rowed over nearly half of his course,

when he suddenly became aware that the bottom of the boat was covered with water. He felt a little surprised, for the boat was almost new, but accounted for the fact by supposing that he had shipped the water in his frantic pulling.

"I'll shoot every man aboard that schooner!" he cried, aloud, enraged at the persistency with which the twin lights were kept burning. "Can't the idiots take a hint? They should know enough to understand that an answer would have been returned a long time ago if—"

He paused suddenly. The water in his boat, which had been but an inch deep before, had suddenly made itself felt on his ankles.

He glanced down and saw that he was carrying so much of the stuff, that his craft had become unwieldy.

"By the Lord! there is something wrong here!" he exclaimed. "Can it be—"

He raised his oars and, stooping, began running his hand along the bottom of the craft. His search was not a vain one, and he suddenly uttered a howl of rage.

He had found a hole through which the water was pouring in rapidly.

"The boat has been scuttled!" he cried, in a rage. "Some infernal villain has ruined her completely."

A further examination proved his assertion. The opening was a clean one, very different from what would have been there had it been made by running a boat on a rock, and, besides, the craft was nearly new and unusually strong.

At the start, the hole must have been filled with something, for when it gave away the inward rush of water was rapid.

Barstow was not a man to succumb to adverse circumstances. He could swim to the schooner from where he then was, but he preferred to remain in the boat and take it through if possible.

Tearing off his coat in the same state of fury, he rolled it into a compact form and began crowding it into the opening.

For a moment it seemed as though he would succeed, but, suddenly, there was a slight crackling and the whole bottom of the boat gave way, the water rushed up to embrace the colonel and he found himself without a plank under his feet.

He quickly comprehended the nature of his fresh trouble and hastened to relieve himself from the wreck. A few vigorous strokes accomplished this result, and as there was no longer any use of thinking about the boat, he struck out for the schooner.

Looking up to locate her, he was surprised to see that her lights were no longer visible.

"Hang the fools!" he thought, in fresh fury. "They take a notion to realize their imprudence just when I need a beacon. My situation here may yet become—*Hallo!*"

He broke off in an angry cry, for to his ears had come well-known sounds which indicated that the schooner was in motion; more, that she was moving toward the shore at a considerable rate of speed.

Again the colonel began to storm. What in the name of all that was incomprehensible could have caused so mad a step?

Instinctively, he glanced toward the coast, and there, on the top of the cliff, burned the red light!

"Treachery!" shouted the colonel, his anger giving way to alarm. "By all the gods! some one has played me false! Yet, why should the schooner move toward the shore when the red light is stationary? I must gain her deck!"

He was so impatient to accomplish this that, though the Water Witch was dashing rapidly toward him, he struck out to meet her.

On came the schooner under full sail, but now utterly dark, for even the binnacle light was not burning, and Barstow began to think that her crew had indeed gone crazy. For the second officer of the vessel, the man Turner, he had never had a very high opinion, and he resolved that this night should be his last in command.

Suddenly the white sails shot into view in the darkness, and then the luckless plotter realized that he was liable to be run down, as he was directly in the schooner's course.

He swam furiously to one side, and when he saw that he would escape such a fate by a hair's breadth, began to think about hailing the craft. She had orders not to take any notice of people she chanced to find in trouble, so some original words must be improvised to arrest attention.

"Schooner ahoy!" he shouted with all his power. "Ahoy the Water Witch! Help, here, Black Brethren!"

He poured out the words in rapid succession, for the emergency demanded such action, and he was pleased to see that he had arrested attention.

The schooner swept past him, but he sent up another shout, and the orders which floated faintly to his ears told him that all was well.

The vessel was brought to, and before many minutes he had caught at a rope flung out to him, and was ascending to the deck, wet, weary, and full of wrath.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE FALSE BEACON.

THE crew of the schooner would not have answered the unexpected hail from the water had not the words chosen by the colonel showed them that it came from one of the Black League.

Still, no one was prepared to see Barstow himself emerge, like a veritable Neptune, from the water, and they stood in blank amazement as he confronted them.

He, however, did not intend to let much time go to waste, and his angry voice at once rung out:

"What, in the fiend's name, does this mean?" he demanded, confronting Turner.

"I don't understand, sir," the mate stammered, for he had a profound awe for the mighty colonel.

"Haven't I ordered you never to run the schooner inside the outer bar?"

"We were signaled in, sir."

"Signaled in?"

"Yes, sir."

"What do you mean?"

"The rules say that if the red light is swung twice in a circle, and then like a pendulum, we are to make for the shore, and though we never had the order before, we got it to-night and we obeyed—that's all."

Mr. Turner spoke in an aggrieved way.

"Are you sure you received that signal?"

"I am, and I can prove it by the crew. Ain't I right, men?"

"Yes, sir, we all see'd it," replied one bronzed old fellow, and his companions echoed his words.

"By Judas! Jabez Peters has betrayed us!" the colonel exclaimed.

"He told me to run down here—"

"I know he did; I don't blame you, Turner. He is lying at the village severely wounded, and it seems he has weakened and told our secrets. Curse him! if I ever get my hands on him I'll have revenge!"

"I don't believe he has weakened, sir," said the mate, boldly.

"Of course he has. In what other way could those fellows learn our signals?"

"I don't know that, but I do know the captain's build. He kin die, but he won't peach."

The opposition turned Barstow's wrath again against Turner and he stormed like a madman, but the mate had grown suddenly calm.

"See here, the case may not be so despr't as it seems," he observed. "I'd like to send the schooner down the coast a bit under Walters while I take a boat and look inter that light business."

The suggestion calmed Barstow somewhat, and after a little hesitation he agreed to the plan. Turner, with one other man, could take him ashore and afterward rejoin their vessel at a given point.

Having thus decided, the boat was lowered, and, as they pulled away, the schooner's nose was turned several points to the starboard and she moved away down the coast.

"It won't do to make directly for the cliff," said Barstow, looking at the red light. "Of course there is a trap there, and we are not fools enough to walk into it. We will land half a mile, more or less, below, and then creep forward and pit our wits against theirs."

"Ay, ay, sir; that's the proper figure, and I reckon you'll find the old Cap all square."

Barstow did not answer, but relapsed into gloomy thought for which there seemed ample cause. Some one had used the regular signal to call the schooner in to the coast; a signal formed as a means of precaution but never used by Barstow; and the fact that it was now used seemed to prove that some one had betrayed the Black League.

If such was the case, the colonel's days of power at Nuevo Madrid were over and he would consider it a piece of good luck if he could get safely out of the neighborhood.

Once let the operations of the Black Brethren be known and he would be hunted like a wolf.

No wonder he was filled with gloomy forebodings.

While this trio made their way toward the shore they were unconscious of the fact that they were being followed by another boat, a small one with a single occupant, and, judging by his cautious and skillful movements, he seemed in little danger of being discovered.

This lone voyager was Tim Foley, who had persistently followed Barstow from the time when we before saw him on the track.

The colonel was aroused from his meditations by an exclamation from Turner.

"The beacon-light is gone, sir!" he said, excitedly.

Barstow looked toward the shore but saw only darkness. As the mate had said, the red light had gone from the cliff.

This fact put matters on a new footing, but one which puzzled the men in the foremost boat. They consulted each other, but could not agree as to the probable cause of the beacon's disappearance; but Barstow determined to go on with the work he had begun.

Leaving him, we will return to Long-Haired

Max, whom we left at the point when he had discovered the schooner's light.

After learning that the craft was expected up the coast, he had taken certain measures to trap the crew, provided the warning of their ally did not reach and warn them away from Nueve Madrid.

Alcalde Jones had several men at his disposal whom he knew he could trust, and these were passed over to Max, with directions to obey his orders, and he had found for them a red light which was to be used to decoy the schooner's boat ashore, if possible.

Accordingly, as he neared the water, he was not surprised to see the light on the cliff, and he at once hastened to that point.

He found two of his men at their post, but the light from the schooner was no longer visible.

"Where is the Water Witch?" was his first question. "I saw her light ten minutes ago."

"It was put out, an' we ain't s e'd nothin' sence," one of the men answered.

"Then, by Jupiter, the fellows have been warned, and have taken flight. According to the usual programme, they should have sent a boat ashore, but at the same time have kept their lights going. The fact that their light was extinguished proves that they are gone."

The cavalier's theory was a natural one, but had he known the code of signals better, and known what had occurred on the cliff, he would have made no such mistake.

One of his men, while waiting, had yielded to one of those impulses which sometimes seize people, and swung the signal-lantern over his head in a circle. By chance, he had made just two circles, and this, in the language of the Black League, said to the men on board the schooner:

"Extinguish all lights and run inside the outer bar; when there, await orders!"

Could Max have pierced the darkness with his eyesight, he would have perceived the schooner nearer the town than she had ever been before; but his expressed opinion was much more natural.

While Long Haired Max stood there on the cliff, he was unconscious of the fact that he was observed by hostile and burning eyes; he did not suspect that in the dusky shadows crouched a man who had followed him from beyond the town, mad for revenge, and madder yet because, at that moment, the cavalier had two companions.

This man was Buck Eagan.

"I'll kill ye afore the night is over!" muttered the fellow, shaking his fist. "I don't take no sech poundin' as this in good part. I'll kill ye, but I'll wait till ye are alone; perhaps I'll crawl inter ther hotel winder. But wot in thunder does this red light biz mean?"

Eagan had been Barstow's bravo, but as he had a weakness for liquor, he had never been trusted with the secrets of the Black League.

"We may as well extinguish the light and go back to the town," said Max, abruptly, after thinking for a moment. "Make haste!"

He had suddenly decided to hasten to Barstow's house and learn if he was abroad.

The light was extinguished, which shows why it was so suddenly missed by the men in the boat; but Max and his friends had scarcely disappeared when Buck Eagan emerged from cover.

"Durned ef I don't hev a look at that thar light," he said. "I don't understand et a tall; but it are cl'ar that ther long-haired dardy is up ter some trick. I'll mention this ter ther colonel, an' he'll hunt him down. I pity ther man that feels Barstow's claws."

He drew the lantern from the niche where it had been concealed and examined it. To aid in the work he started a flame within, but the lantern was an ordinary one, except that the glass was of a red color.

"Thar is some durned game afoot!" muttered Buck, looking at the signal-light.

In one sense the fellow was right, for at the southern side of the cliff three men were creeping cautiously up, and a few yards behind a fourth followed close at their heels.

As the reader will suspect, they were Barstow and his sailors, dogged by Tim Foley.

Suddenly Turner uttered an exclamation.

"By thunder! the red light is goin' again!" he said.

Sure enough, the beacon was burning on the cliff, and Barstow grew dark with passion.

"Whatever the result, I'll make it hot for whoever is there!" he lissed. "Trick or trap, I'll have my revenge; if we are lot outnumbered, I'll kill the dogs!"

Tim Foley had been delayed by a slip and fall, and did not suspect that the red light was again burning until he heard sounds of a fight on the rock. There were shouts and mad exclamations, mingled with wild cries for mercy, and Tim, disregarding the fact that he was without a weapon, was about to rush forward, when all sounds of strife ceased.

Whoever had been assailed on the rock, the fight was over, and it would be madness for him to interfere.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

ON THE CLIFF AND AT THE MISSION.

At daybreak, the following morning, three men left the village and walked rapidly toward the south. They were Max, Alcalde Jones and Tim Foley.

"It is a pity that we did not succeed any better last night," said the cavalier.

"Ef we had be'n south-sayers, so that we could hev pierced ther dark-ess with our eagle eyes, we might hev gobbled up ther schooner, boot an' saddle," added the alcalde.

"I fear that would not have put us in possession of the Black League's secret," Max replied.

"I'd hev rigged up a rack, an' tore 'em limb from limb in ther boodwah of jestic," said Jones. "I'd hev pried ther jaws apart!"

Max knew his threats were not sincere enough to be argued, and he became silent as they neared the beacon-cliff.

Tim Foley had come to them with the story of a fight on the cliff, and they were on their way to investigate the matter. As Max had not suspected that he was pursued, he could not imagine who had lighted the signal after he left and so fallen victim to Barstow's wrath.

The latter had returned to his house an hour after Max took up his post there as a watcher, and the remainder of the night had passed quietly.

Daybreak, we will remark parenthetically, found the Water Witch, with Turner and the remainder of the crew on board, well down the coast and out of sight of Nuevo Madrid.

Foley led the way up the rough ground, and the trio soon reached the top of the cliff. All was silent there, and at first sight the place seemed deserted; but Tim, who was still in advance, suddenly paused as he passed a good-sized boulder, and pointed with a shaking finger.

"Begorra, it is jest about as I told yez, an' I advise yez to moind yer nerves. Look a-there, will yez?"

By this time the other men were at hand, but the cavalier, who was in advance, suddenly paused at Tim's side. No wonder the Irishman had shown excitement.

Long-Haired Max saw a headless body, and in its hand was the signal-light of the Black League!

"Durnation wildcats!" cried the alcalde, as he made haste to join them; "do you see a ghost, or what's ther cause o' this hyar statoo business? Your narve er a leetle unstrung, I reckon, but I—Great Pompey!"

His honor paused and elevated both hands, and a silence fell upon the trio. The sight before them was indeed startling.

Seated with his back to the rock was what had once been a human being, and it was still intact, clothing and all, except for the fact that its head was gone!

This strange object, sitting there silent and grim, held in one hand the lantern which Max had used the previous night, and what was more, held it well forward as though still signaling to the schooner.

"In Heaven's name!" cried the cavalier, "what have we here? A headless man, with the beacon light in his hand. But *who* was he?"

"Wan av dhe men yez set to watch, sure," said Tim.

"I have once told you they both returned to the village with me," said Max, impatiently.

"Durnation wildcats, I reckon it are a joke," said the alcalde, slowly.

Max conquered his feelings and approached the object. There was no joke about it. A man had been beheaded, and it was by means of a supporting stone and some cords that he was enabled to hold the light in his lifeless hand.

"We will look about fur clews," said Jones, suddenly. "Sech a thing never happened in my jurisprudence afore, an' I must sift ther affair to ther bottom."

The three scattered for the search, but only a few moments had passed when a shout caused Tim and the alcalde to cease their work.

"Look this way," said Long-Haired Max. "The Black Leaguers have indeed left one clew!"

"Howly Pater!" cried Tim, as he saw that the cavalier held in his hands a human head.

It was a horrible state of affairs, and not one of the men retained his composure. Max, however, spoke calmly as the others neared him.

"The mystery deepens," he said, thoughtfully. "This is the head of Buck Eagan, and it undoubtedly belongs on the body, but I cannot understand—Hal! I have an idea. Last night I fought and whipped Eagan; he may have dogged me here and so fell into the trap. Yes, I see it all. He started the signal light, after I left, and when Barstow came upon him he thought he was a traitor. But, why was his body left here? Barstow must have been mad."

"He niver did a better dade, I'm thinkin'," said Tim, "an' I'm only sorry he is not here beside his shipmate."

"Hole on, thar, hole on!" said the alcalde, suddenly. "Somebody's comin'. Get inter ambush on ther jump!"

The man he had seen had disappeared behind a rock which lay in his path, but Max had sufficient faith in Jones's judgment so that he hurriedly replaced Eagan's head where he had found it and they sought a refuge near at hand.

They had but a minute to wait, and then Colonel Barstow appeared on the scene. He looked worried, anxious and paler than usual, but his face cleared as he saw Eagan's body as he had left it.

He wasted no time, but, seizing it by the arms, dragged it to the verge of the cliff and cast it over, lantern and all, and when the head had been cast in the same direction, he seemed to breathe much freer. Next, he proceeded to brush earth over what blood was visible and then no sign of his crime remained on the cliff.

He, however, did not delay, but at once disappeared from the scene.

"Wal, durnation wildcats!" said his honor, "this hyar is a remarkable a'fair. What's that thar fur?"

"He regrets having left the body as he did," said Max, "and will now destroy all evidence of his crime. Undoubtedly, he has started for the foot of the cliff where he will sink the body in the water."

"Let him sink it!" said Jones, rubbing his hands. "I reckon as how we hev got evidence enough this 'ere proximo ter hang ther critter. True, Buck Eagan desarved all he got, but I'll show Mister Barstow that he can't gilltinize people in my jurisprudence arter ther fashion o' Robespierre when he cut off Lucretia Borgia's head!"

"Your idea is a good one," said Max, "and whenever we get ready to crush Barstow, this affair will be enough."

Watching from the top of the cliff, they saw him sink the remains of Eagan in the water which lapped the base of the rock, and then he believed himself safe.

The shrewdest of criminals at times commit acts of folly, and it was that which caused the colonel to fix the body of Eagan as he did, out of mere bravado. He had killed him believing that he was a traitor, and that it was he who had lured the schooner inside the outer bay; and in the excitement of his triumph he thought it would be a brilliant idea to show his foes their ally thus decapitated.

Awakening in the morning, however, he found his views entirely changed, and he had hastened to the cliff to obliterate all signs of his crime; but he had come too late; his enemies had proof enough to hang him.

After concealing the body he did not tarry near the spot but hastened back to his house.

Even the vengeance he had taken on a traitor, as he believed, did not make amends for the misfortunes of the previous night. He was positive that some of the people of Nuevo Madrid must have seen the schooner's lights, and, at the very least, it would make talk.

That was bad enough, but he had other woes. His plans with Donna Inez had failed most lamentably. He had hoped by having her visit the jail to impress on her mind the horrors of such life, to make her believe her father guilty, and then to appear himself, when she was attacked by his three ruffians, and figure as a hero.

So far as the last part of his plan was concerned, there had been a most complete failure, and he must now account to Donna Inez for his absence by some ingenious falsehood.

After breakfast he spent an hour in improving his personal appearance and then walked toward the *casa*, biding the uneasiness he could not avoid feeling under a mask of coldness and *hauteur* which he had always found very effective among his dependents.

In passing the ruined mission, he was observed by two men who were not at all awed—Long-Haired Max and Alcalde Jones.

"Ther durnation critter is goin' ter Don Ramon's," said Jones. "He goes thar more nor is nec'ssary, an' I'm thinkin' I ought ter warn them in a judicial capacity not ter trust or harbor him."

"Wait a little, my friend," said Max quietly. "Our plot is about ripe, and when we spring it, the infernal wretch will find his own schemes nipped in the bud."

"I shall glory in his disappoint'ment, fur it will be ther bridle tower o' virtue an' etcetery round hyar. Rake up all ther evidence you kin, my boyee, an' when we bring him ter ther climax he shall be as broke up as was Richard I, arter ther battle o' Waterloo, when he said, 'My kingdom fur a boss!' I don't want sech durnation critters in my jurisprudence an' I won't hev 'em."

"His day is short," said Max, somberly. "I have a father's blood to avenge, and if I delay it is only to strike surely."

"Right you be, ter a fine pint. His flag must come down. I won't hev him in Nuevo Madrid next 'lection day, anyhow."

"The *naive* confession caused Max to smile, for he still remembered the alcalde's account of Barstow's opposition to his re-election to the office of "alcalde and mayor;" but as the colonel went on, Max aroused.

"We are here on business, you know, and the time is flying. Let us explore the ruin."

"Wade in, my boyee, an' when you ketch a ghost I'll double-iron him. Durned ef I don't commit ther hull passel on 'em for vagrancy!"

"You are skeptical," said Max.

"No, I ain't; not an oita; but I hain't no faith. Hows'ever, hyar goes."

In truth, the alcalde was without faith, Max, remembering what he had seen about the mission, had proceeded by a course of reasoning to establish a connection between the ruin and the Black League.

Barstow was the ally, or leader, of the mysterious band, and as the mission was near his house, and said to be haunted, what was more natural than that it should be used as some sort of a rendezvous or *cache*?

Of course some one had an object in playing ghost, and it looked very likely to Long-Haired Max that if Barstow was making a secret use of the place he should try to frighten off the superstitious Mexicans in just that way.

Consequently the alcalde and himself had come with pick-ax and hammer to sound and explore the place, to look for secret rooms and other suspicious places.

Evidently it was barren soil, for at the end of three hours they had found nothing, though both had labored faithfully. It was Max who first ceased work.

"We may as well adjourn, alcalde," he said, "for our single arms and our present tools will ne'er accomplish the work."

Mr. Jones dropped upon a broken pillar with a reverberating sigh.

"My single arm is growin' mighty weak," he said, frankly. "I ain't in practice as a grave-digger, though I'm perlite enough ter say ter you I like ther business right well. It's irritating to ther muscles an' has a tendency ter be a appetizer, but I think my calling is not this one."

"These heavy pillars and foundation-stones need not less than four men, and the in-fallen parts are in hopeless confusion," said Max.

"Thar is still business in yer eye. Do you mean ter execrate ther place?"

"I certainly do, alcalde. I am convinced that this old mission holds secrets well worth knowing. Do you believe in the ghosts?—do you believe spirits really return to earth? The idea is rubbish, and yet I saw the white-robed monk and his female victim. What is the natural conclusion? Why, simply that this place has a secret, and its nature I am resolved to know."

"Now, look-a-hyar, my boyee, let me ax a question. Don't be skeered—I'm not hyar in an officious capacity. Did you, or did you not, on ther night when you see'd these ghosts, h'ist more liquid p'ison than was abnormally good fur you? Wasn't you ther victim o' a optical confusion?"

Mr. Jones asked the question solemnly, but as Max was able to assert that he had not indulged at all, the theory fell to the ground and they walked back to the village, tired and baffled.

CHAPTER XXIX.

MISS LINGARD AT THE MISSION.

BARSTOW'S visit to Casa Victoria that day was outwardly to see Don Ramon and Donna Inez, but he really had another reason and luck favored him.

Entering the house, the first person he saw was Miss Lingard. Of late, the governess had been successful in avoiding him, but this time fate was against her and they met face to face.

She would have passed on with a cold nod, but he put out his hand to stop her.

"Wait," he said, "I have something to say to you."

She paused, the color retreating from her face, but even that and the pitiful look of mental agony made no impression on him.

"You have taken a good deal of trouble to keep out of my way, of late," he said, insolently, "but you need not struggle against fate. I told you, years ago, that I was your master and I mean to convince you."

"What do you want?" she asked, huskily.

"I want you to save yourself. It is a small matter to me, but it means a good deal to you. What if I were to shout your secret here?"

"Oh mercy, have mercy!" she whispered. "They may hear you."

"Aha! so you do not wish it? Of course you do not, and in that you are sensible. Well, I am disposed to be merciful. I will leave you in your paradise, but such magnanimity deserves a reward. Meet me at the ruined mission, an hour after dark, this evening, and I will speak plainly."

"I dare not do it."

"Bah! you are very timid. There is nothing to fear. I will swear that I won't harm you or allow any one else to do so, but I *must* see you there. Will you come? Speak quickly, for I hear Don Ramon's steps. Is it yes or no?"

"Yes," she said, huskily.

"Good. Don't forget; don't dare to forget!"

The parting menace was spoken while she was in rapid retreat, and then, while Barstow went to seek Don Ramon with a bland smile, she es-

escaped to her room, and threw herself into a chair with a moan of anguish.

"Oh Heaven, what new torture is in store for me?" she whispered. "It is blow upon blow and I suppose my evil fate will follow me to the grave. When I reached this distant land I believed I had found oblivion, and in this house I hoped to find rest, peace, forgetfulness. But, no; this man reappeared and turned my Eden into a desert, a place of torture. What shall I do? Shall I flee again or remain and brave his wrath? Shall I meet him to-night? Yes, I must; for I dare not refuse!"

For a long time she sat there, her hands pressed to her feverish forehead. She was suffering mentally and physically, for her head seemed ready to burst with pain brought on by her nervous state, but it was no more than she had endured before.

Is it a wonder that some unfortunates, beset by misfortunes so persistently, superstitiously believe they were "born under an unlucky star?"

That day was one of misery to Miss Lingard, and even the dread she felt for the meeting did not make it pass quickly. She knew that Barstow had some plan in his mind which was as ignoble as himself, and she asked herself again and again what it could be.

Somehow, she felt sure she was to be asked to attack Don Ramon or his daughter in some way, and she resolved to be torn by the rack before she would yield.

Darkness came at last, and at the proper time she managed to leave the house unseen. Since her coming to Nuevo Madrid, she had rarely gone out, and never during the night-time, and she shivered with fear as she hurried toward the old mission.

There were dangerous men about the town, braves and conspirators, and she had none too much faith in the soldiers who followed Mellough's lead; she feared an encounter with any of them.

Nothing startling occurred, however, and she approached the frowning walls of the old mission. There is always something gloomy about a ruined building, and a very slight stretch of the imagination only is needed to convert it into danger.

Until she neared the broken walls, Miss Lingard had not thought of the ghostly stories she had heard from the servants at the casa, but they now came to her mind with crushing force. The crushed tower, the broken roof and the breached walls grew darker and gloomier, and for a moment she stood still, not daring to go nearer.

Then summoning all her resolution, she went on and neared the gateway.

She had no sooner done so than Barstow appeared.

"Why did you hesitate?" he asked, with an unfeeling laugh. "Are you, too, afraid of ghosts?"

"They are not the worst of enemies," she said, with unusual spirit.

"So you throw the gauntlet of war in my face? Don't do it, my dear Miss Lingard. Ha, ha! where did you get such a high-sounding name as that? When a man takes an alias, he chooses a plain one—Brown, Jones, or something of that sort; for he thinks, 'Amid a thousand of the name I shall lose my individuality and myself—my secret will be safe.' But a woman, let her be ever so much of a criminal, must have a high-sounding name. It's a wonder you did not call yourself De Longueville, or something of the sort."

"Is it to say this that you called me here?"

"No; but our history must not be told to the whole world. Step inside this place."

She hesitated, but ended by obeying. The darkness of the ruin alarmed her anew. The broken pillars, which had taken uncouth shapes, seemed like enemies in ambush—all was gloomy and sepulchral.

What a fit place for an assassin's deed!

"Speak at once," she said nervously.

"I will, for I do not want to keep you outside the casa until you are subjected to questioning. Hoping that we will be allies from this evening, I would protect you."

"Go on."

"I will come to business at once, and speak plainly. You and I are old acquaintances, and I know certain secrets you do not wish the world to know. I have, I suppose, been rather harsh in the past, but we were not friends. We never can be, I suppose, but I am willing to swear to keep your secret if you will win your freedom."

"What do you wish?" she asked again.

"Frankly, I wish to have Don Ramon Victoria in my power. As you must have suspected, I wish to make Donna Inez my wife. In order to do this, I must have them in my power, for they are not in favor of the plan. I wish you to aid me."

"What can I do?"

Miss Lingard spoke calmly, and Barstow took courage from the fact that she did not promptly refuse.

"He is, as you know, mixed up with this conspiracy in which Castro is concerned. The conspiracy hardly deserves such a name, for it

is but the work of a few foolish young fellows like Castro—men who will never create more than a ripple; but people believe it a gigantic plot. Well, what I wish of you is to furnish proof of Don Ramon's guilt."

"How can I, if he is innocent?"

"I will furnish you with certain papers, which I wish you to hide in Don Ramon's private room."

"With what object?"

"Mellough will find them there and thus secure proof enough to crush the proud don, but I shall step forward in my role of champion, and save them from his hand."

"Are you sure the plan will succeed?"

"Quite sure, for Don Ramon will not sacrifice himself for his daughter."

"It will not succeed," said Miss Lingard, with sudden firmness.

"And why not?"

"Because I refuse to be your tool. Wretch, do you think me vile enough to turn like a viper upon the man who has given me shelter? Do you believe me capable of such Judas-like meanness? James Barstow, you have mistaken your person. I will die before I will agree to your plan!"

The governess spoke with vehemence which surprised the colonel quite as much as it angered him. He had expected some resistance, but her manner told of a fixed resolution which staggered his assurance for a moment.

"Fool!" he finally exclaimed, harshly.

"But not the wicked wretch you think," she added.

He grasped her arm tightly.

"You will do as I say," he said, imperiously.

"Never!"

"I will tell your secret to Don Ramon."

"Whenever you choose."

"More than that, I will tell the authorities here that you are wanted at the East. You shall be dragged back there to suffer for your crimes!"

"You are wasting words, sir, for I no longer ask for mercy. I have struggled against my fate until I am worn and weary. I shall struggle no more. Go on, Colonel Barstow; shout my secret to the four winds if you will; drag me to the gallows if you see fit; but remember, once for all, that I will not commit another crime to hide that secret. Not even to save my life will I turn against Don Ramon and his family."

The pale, timid governess seemed transformed. A brilliant color had sprung into her cheeks, her eyes flashed and her voice was clear and defiant. She had turned at bay after long years; pressed to the wall she was willing to give up a life which was not blessed with a ray of sunshine.

The conviction came to Barstow's mind, and terrible fury crept into his face.

Once more he seized her arm and hissed out a menace with startling force.

"By Heaven, woman! you will never leave here until you do promise. I will kill you if you refuse! Ha! ha! this is a fit place for a sepulcher, and the old mission will tell no tales. Look around you; see the darkness and the gloom. Ha! you shiver. Good! now hear me when I swear that unless you give the promise, I will kill you where you now stand."

CHAPTER XXX.

A SHOT AT A SPECTER.

BARSTOW had spoken truly when he said that Miss Lingard shivered. Her nerves would have been of iron had she done otherwise. Even when the hope of life has been abandoned, one does not desire to be murdered.

The gloom of the old ruin, the tombstone-like proportions of the broken pillars, the crumbling walls, the fact that she was wholly in the power of this merciless wretch—all combined were enough to have alarmed even the strongest of men.

She trembled in his grasp, but her voice arose with firmness.

"Kill me if you will!" she said; "that blow ends my earthly troubles."

"Bah! why should you sleep in this dark den. You know not the horrors of the place. Men say there are no ghosts, but I will swear the mission is haunted. At midnight, I have more than once heard groans and cries issuing from within these dark walls. You must have heard of the tragedy of the place—how a fair young girl was killed by a monk—"

"Yes, and how the girl afterward appeared in the village, alive and well," Miss Lingard retorted; but she was really far less brave than she seemed.

Before the colonel could answer, a hollow groan sounded from the interior of the ruin, a sound so dreadful that the governess almost dropped to the rocky floor. She was not superstitious, but she was human.

Barstow stood in silence, but he still kept his hold on her arm. His manner was that of a man very much alarmed, and he suddenly put out his left hand, pointing toward the eastern wall.

"Look!" he cried, in a husky whisper.

Miss Lingard obeyed.

Along the top of the broken wall glided a female form, or a visitor from the spirit world.

Seemingly, it was a woman clad all in white, with a ghostly face to match; and Miss Lingard could not but remember the young girl who was said to have been murdered in the mission.

Directly opposite to them she paused and, raising her hands as though in prayer, turned her face toward the dark sky.

"Look!" again whispered the colonel, his voice more husky than ever.

His gesture called Miss Lingard's attention away from the girl and she saw another figure on the wall. This time it was that of a monk, or, more properly, perhaps, his ghost, for he, too, was clad in white and his face was pale as death.

He advanced along the wall with a quick and cautious step and reached the girl. Suddenly he flung one arm about her, the other hand arose in the air and then descended with a quick sweep, like the stroke of an assassin.

Neither the monk nor the girl uttered a cry, but without a struggle she sunk back in his arms.

All this the governess saw with silent horror. Her nervous fears had been so operated upon that she looked upon all as real, but, too much alarmed to cry out or seek to flee, she remained as though in a trance.

The impressive scene had thus far proceeded exactly as on a former occasion when we took the reader to the mission, but it seemed as though an extra act had been added.

The stillness of the night was suddenly broken by a sound which rung out with startling clearness, but which even the governess recognized as the report of a revolver, and at the sound the ghostly monk reeled back from the wall, and after vainly flinging his arms about in search of a substantial support, fell headlong into the interior of the mission.

A curse fell from Barstow's lips, a sound strangely out of place with his late show of superstitious fear, while at the same moment the phantom girl, evidently forgetting that she had just been scientifically assassinated, showed plain signs of life and fear, and leaped after the monk.

A shout arose beyond the wall at the same point from which came the revolver shot, and its clear inflection, coupled with the fact that both the monk and the girl had made a very perceptible sound when they struck the mission floor, convinced Miss Lingard that the specter element was a fraud.

Barstow was evidently alarmed, and he began dragging her toward the interior of the place, but excitement gave her a sudden courage, and she made a quick movement, broke from his hold, and darted through the mission gate.

As she did so she collided with another person, a man, with such force that both nearly fell to the ground, but he managed to retain his footing, and held fast to her.

"You need not struggle; I have caught you!" he cried, exultantly. "What! you?"

The last word was uttered in evident amazement, and Miss Lingard looked up into the face of Long-Haired Max.

"Save me! save me!" she exclaimed.

"Quick, tell me who is in that den?" he said, seeming to at once clear her from all connection with the plotters. "I shot at something—what was it?"

"A man disguised as a specter, I think," she said, with equal terseness.

"By Jupiter! I must see this matter through. Will you follow me inside?"

"They will kill you—"

"I do not fear them. Follow me!"

Without another word Max dashed through the gateway, and Miss Lingard followed, because she was too much frightened to remain alone.

The ruin had become silent. When Max paused, after going a few steps, he could not hear a sound except that of their own breathing. Still, he had reason to suppose there was more to be found by looking, and he hurried across the floor, and stood at that point where the monk had fallen.

There were no signs of white-robed or any other species of figures.

"Be careful!" warned Miss Lingard. "There are men here, and they may strike you unaware."

"Do you know who they were?"

"Colonel Barstow was one."

"Aha! I thought so. Did he play the ghost?"

The governess regretted that she had allowed the name to escape her, but it was too late to retract.

"I was standing beside him near the gate, when the two white figures appeared on the wall. Some one fired a revolver, and one of them fell; and then the other leaped down. Both struck heavily on the floor; they were not specters."

"Of course not; I knew it was a trick, and that is why I fired. I now wish I had used a real cartridge instead of a blank one, for I would like to know those fellows. I'm afraid I have lost them, for I have no means of striking a light to search the ruin."

"It would be dangerous. We are even liable

to be shot down where we now stand. Let us go outside!"

Max knew this was the wiser, if not the most satisfactory way, and they went through the gate and paused by the wall.

"You will greatly oblige me by relating all that has occurred inside here," Max said.

Miss Lingard hesitated. She had defied the colonel, but she was not mad enough to destroy all her hopes for the future by her own work. When Barstow revealed her secret it was time for her defense, and not before.

"I was in the ruin with Colonel Barstow," she said, after a pause, "when those two figures appeared on the wall. Then came a revolver-shot, one of them fell and the other leaped down. That is all I know."

Long Haired Max did not fail to see that she had something to conceal, but he gave no sign then.

"I was watching outside for these ghosts, or anything else which might interest me, and when they appeared I fired a blank cartridge. The ghostly monk lost his head and fell, and I cordially hope he broke his neck; but if we had fifty lanterns we would not be able to find him. This old den has secret passages of which we know nothing, but I'll be hanged if I don't get at the secret soon. Come, let us go to Don Ramon's."

"Will you enter?"

"No; I merely wish to see you safely there."

"You are very kind."

"I have a feeling of pity for you."

"For me?"

"Yes."

"And why do you pity me?"

"Shall I speak plainly?"

She hesitated for a moment.

"Yes," she then said.

"Miss Lingard, you will pardon me, but I think there should be a closer bond between us two."

She started violently, in terror, he thought; and he hastened to add:

"Pardon me, you misunderstand. What I was about to say, is that I have reason to believe we are both enemies of Colonel Barstow, and, as such, we should be friends."

"Why do you think I am his enemy?" she asked, more calmly.

"Because I have overheard him threatening you. I know he is your enemy, and as I have sworn to kill him, our interests are mutual. Come, Miss Lingard, shall we be allies? I claim to be a gentleman, and as such I shall be your friend."

"What can we do against Barstow?" she asked, like one in a dream.

"We can do everything!" said Max, fiercely. "We can disgrace and ruin him; strip him of his ill-gotten riches, and kill him like the dog he is. All this we can do, and it shall be done!"

"Why do you hate him so bitterly?" Miss Lingard asked, in wonder.

"Because he murdered my father!"

Max uttered the word with deep emotion, but his attention was all directed toward the governess by the cry she uttered. She had staggered back, as though fainting, and he caught her in his arms.

CHAPTER XXXI.

COLONEL BARSTOW AT HOME.

MISS LINGARD lay in the cavalier's arms almost as a dead weight, and he grew alarmed, as men will in such emergencies. The average masculine being had rather have a half-dozen mortally wounded persons of his own sex on his hands than one fainting woman.

"Good Heaven! what is the matter?" Max demanded, in great trepidation.

Miss Lingard rallied, gained strength, and started from his arms.

"It is nothing, nothing!" she said, showing a great effort to regain calmness. "I am not strong, and I often have such ill turns."

"If I can aid you, I shall be glad to do so."

"You can do nothing, sir, and I am again well. We were speaking of Colonel Barstow. So you are seeking him to avenge a father's blood?"

"I am. Can you blame me?"

"No, you are right; so vile a wretch deserves punishment. And yet—yet—the Bible says, 'Thou shalt not kill!'"

"Did Barstow think of that when he murdered my father? Did he think of Divine teachings when he robbed him of the wealth intended for Ernest Baldwin's wife and children? No; he thought of nothing except the thirst for gold which is the curse of the world."

"Some time," said the governess, in a subdued voice, which contrasted greatly with his fierce one; "I shall be glad to hear your story, but I can not remain now. You—you have asked me to be your ally. What can I do?"

"You can tell me of the state of affairs at Casa Victoria. I feel sure Barstow has some plot against Don Ramon and his daughter, but I am not encouraged to call there, and I walk in the dark. I would go boldly to the don and tell him my suspicions, but he would be sure to

upset my plan, which is to let the colonel go on, and then thwart him in the hour when triumph seems sure to be his."

"Can you thwart him?"

"I can and will. At any moment when I desire I can place a rope around his neck. In a very few days the blow will fall; I only delay to make his downfall the more bitter."

Miss Lingard seemed to have regained all of her courage. She was stronger than usual, and hope had advanced to the front. Plainly, she believed in Max and in his power.

She asked for his promise that he would divulge nothing until Barstow was fully in his power, and then told how she had been ordered to place damaging papers in the casa, and how the colonel had boasted that by such means he would compel Donna Inez to marry him.

The hour was growing somewhat late, and as the governess did not wish to be missed, she soon bade her champion good-night, and hastened toward the house.

Long-Haired Max walked toward the village in a thoughtful mood.

"Another nail in Barstow's coffin. I have now got him down pretty fine, and there will be a mighty jar along the California coast one of these days. When the corner-stone of his tower is knocked out, down comes the whole edifice on the jump. But this Miss Lingard—what of her? She attracts and perplexes me so that I know not what to think; but I will know more of her anon."

Going inside the casa, the governess met Don Ramon. There was an anxious look on her face, but it quickly disappeared.

"We have been troubled about you," he said, with his usual grave kindness. "Inez missed you, and as it was so unusual for you to go out, we feared some trouble had occurred."

"I believe I am growing brave," she answered, with a brighter smile than he had ever before seen on her face. "I have been out for fresh air, and I really feel better for it."

"The idea is good, but I would advise you not to travel alone after dark. There are evil men near Nuevo Madrid, and I have already spoken to Inez in regard to the matter."

"You are right, Senor Victoria, and I will heed what you say."

"There is trouble enough about here already," he added, with a sigh. "Of late the sun has not shone."

"I have faith to believe that all will end well," she said, sympathetically.

"The sky is dark, dark, but I will not lose hope. I understand your good wishes, Miss Lingard, and you have my sincerest thanks."

With the courtly grace peculiar to him, he lifted her hand, pressed it lightly to his lips, and then, with a respectful bow, passed on without another word.

The face of the governess flushed. From Don Ramon that act meant more than a mere form. At the very least, it said to her, "you are not an inferior but an equal," and there was a strong suspicion that it meant more.

Be that as it may, Miss Lingard went to her room with flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes; and it may be mentioned as a noteworthy fact that, five minutes later, she was attentively studying her face in the glass.

What dream had entered Miss Lingard's mind?

At that moment, Colonel Barstow was in his own house. He had retreated most precipitately when the ghostly monk fell before the revolver shot, and the governess had barely passed the mission gate when he was making long strides for the lowest part of the wall.

He gained it, leaped over and ran away at full speed, thanking fate when he saw that he was not pursued.

He paused at the door before entering, looked back at the mission, hesitated and then shook his head angrily.

"It will not do; I might ruin myself by returning; and yet if that infernal fool is badly wounded it may all come out. Who fired that shot? I believe it was that Long-Haired Max, for it was very like him. By Judas! everything goes against me since his coming, and unless his prying tongue is silenced all the secrets of the Black League will soon be laid bare. I'll see to that work to-night and then put Bartolo on his track."

He entered the house and was proceeding to his private room when he was met by the mysterious woman who had given to Max the name of "Miss Smith."

She was paler than usual and her face was almost like marble.

"Will you go to her room?" she asked.

"Does she want to see me?" he asked, surlily.

"Do you think I wish for your company?"

Miss Smith bitterly asked.

"Scarcely, and I didn't expect she would. However, I will go and see what new freak has seized her."

"It is a new one," muttered Miss Smith.

"What did you say?"

"Nothing."

"Oh! I didn't know but what it was something unusual!" he sneered.

She made no reply but they went on until a heavy door was reached. She pushed it open.

"Not locked?" he said, harshly. "Why is this?"

Miss Smith did not answer. She pushed the door fully open, and as she did so there was no occasion for a reply.

The room was peculiar in that it was very softly carpeted, that the same covering extended up the walls for ten feet, that not a chair was visible, and that, though a bed lay in one corner, it rested on the floor.

Nowhere, except at the very top of the room, was there visible a piece of metal, or even of wood.

Barstow looked only at the couch. There lay a woman on whose face was a pallor and emaciation which was very affecting, but the colonel's eyes were keen and he uttered a little cry.

"Dead!" he said, blankly.

"Dead, sir. She is before Him who gave her life, beyond earthly pain and sorrow. The mill-stone is removed from your neck, Colonel Barstow!"

"The mill-stone? Why, Ellen, at this hour—"

"Let us waste no words, sir. They can not undo the past. There lies all that is mortal of my sister, of your wife. No longer will this room be the cage of a madwoman; in Heaven, the cloud is removed from her mind. Whether you had any share in placing that cloud there, I leave you to judge."

Miss Smith spoke steadily, but under all was a current of mingled sorrow and menace.

"How dare you accuse me?" he angrily asked.

"I do not accuse you; I do not even see the need of further words between us. I called you in to show you that she is gone, and I thought that as you had not visited her for two months, you might wish to look on her face before the grave forever hides it. Now, sir, you can go to Senorita Victoria."

Barstow started violently.

"What do you mean?" he angrily asked.

"Simply that I am not blind, sir. Further than that, I have nothing to say. Will you leave me alone?"

"Yes," he said, sullenly; and then, with more venom in his voice; "Do whatever is needed and call on me for all money, but let me hope you will leave my house as soon as possible after—after the end."

"Rest assured I will," Miss Smith promptly said.

He went out, and then she closed the door and, going to the couch, knelt beside the dead woman and burst into tears.

It was a sad scene, the padded room, where in the days that were past they had not dared to leave even a knife lest the madwoman should injure herself, the weeping sister, the lifeless clay.

Yet, Miss Smith would not have had it otherwise; on the silent face she read a look which seemed like an echo of peace beyond the portals of Death's door; she would not have brought back the departed breath if she could.

When she arose it was because she had heard a step outside the door which her acute hearing told her was a strange one, and she opened the door a little and looked after the visitor.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE NIGHT RIDE.

THE man was an entire stranger to Miss Smith, and a Mexican at that, but she had known Barstow long enough, so that she was not surprised to see him going straight to the colonel's room.

"A private interview, I suppose," she said, with a strange smile. "Perhaps it will not be so private as they think. I will see."

She went back to the padded room and removed her shoes, after which she crept cautiously along the hall to the colonel's door. It was closed, but the key was not in the lock, and she could see both Barstow and the Mexican.

Their words were also perfectly audible.

"You are sure of what you say?" the colonel asked.

"If Duke told the truth, there can be no doubt of it," the Mexican answered.

"And this Marcy will reach San Lopez tomorrow?"

"Yes."

"Very well, then, I want you to see that he stays there. If he reaches Nuevo Madrid we are all ruined. By the way, you must look sharp, for this Long-Haired Max may have men in the field also. He has been thwarting me a good deal of late, and it would be odd if so shrewd a fellow did not suspect that I might prevent his important witness from reaching here. Look out for counterplots, Benito."

"Si, senor; you can depend on me. Shall I now return to San Lopez?"

"Yes, go at once. If you will cut off Baldwin's witness, I'll serve his master in the same way. I am going to set a good man on his track."

Miss Smith waited to hear no more, but glided back to the padded room.

"So!" she muttered, "the wretch is still plotting. I believe I see here a chance to aid Baldwin, and I won't let the chance pass. The hour is not yet late, and he cannot have retired. I will go to his hotel."

It was an hour later that Max pushed open the door of the alcalde's office and found that worthy man just preparing to desert the "boudoir of justice" for the night.

"Hullo! be you back ag'in? Forgot suthin' you didn't remember afore, I take it. Second thoughts is sometimes the best, though not always pleasant. Set down an' address ther jury."

"I am going out of town ten minutes hence. I've ordered my horse, and I'm going to reach San Lopez in an hour," said Max.

"Damnation wild-cats! be you *non mentus* compass? What in thunder be you goin' ter San Lopez fur?"

"To save the man Marcy from the plots of Barstow. You remember it was he who saw my father murdered. He has recovered sufficiently from his late illness to start for Nuevo Madrid by easy stages, but my enemies intend to murder him at San Lopez."

"An' tha' tha' is ther reason you're goin' on this Bill O'Shanter gallop? You're right, my boyee, perfectly right. Don't spare hoss-flesh, an' ef you want anything more, all the resources o' this hyar jurisprudence is at your command. But how did you larn all this?"

Max explained that a woman calling herself Miss Smith had visited him at the hotel, and also told all he knew about her.

The interview was not prolonged, but, before they went, the alcalde presented Max with a flask of whisky, taking pains to assure him it was for medicinal purposes.

Shortly after the cavalier left the village and went south by the San Lopez road at a gallop. He read the voice of the heavy clouds and troubled air well enough to know that a storm was near at hand, and he feared it might strike before he reached shelter.

Accordingly, he dashed along at full speed, and the gallant horse stretched his clean limbs for the twelve mile gallop.

Half an hour passed and the horse was still going finely, but lower and lower hung the clouds, while a stiff breeze had sprung up which was blowing directly toward the east.

Occasionally, when the road passed near the shore, the rider could see the water of the ocean, for the wind was driving it so furiously against the land that a long line of foam was everywhere visible.

A bad night for vessels that were not in a safe harbor.

Max pressed on without pausing and, at midnight, neared the first houses of San Lopez.

By this time, however, the fury of the wind had greatly increased, the great billows broke on the shore with a thunder-like sound, and several great drops of rain warned the rider that the storm was at hand.

He dashed into the village and up to the solitary hotel just in time, but he had barely gained cover when the rain struck in all its fury.

His horse had been led to cover, and in the shelter of the bar-room, Max could well afford to laugh as he heard the storm roaring outside.

The landlord was a bluff, honest-looking American, and as they were alone in the room, the cavalier resolved to talk somewhat.

"Have you many guests to-night?" he asked.

"Jest three. Two o' them are Greasers, an' t'other 'un are a white man, like ourselves, though he's rayther shaky on his pins on a'count o' a fever he has had."

"Ha! what's his name?"

"I dunno, but you'll find it on ther book thar."

Max went to the register and read the entry, which was in a bold, though irregular, hand.

"Ben Marcy, Callao, Peru."

"Just as I hoped," he said. "This gentleman is a friend of mine and I would like to see him at once."

"Waal, I s'pose it can be did, though ther hour is a leetle off o' ther hooks," the landlord admitted.

"He will be glad to see me."

Max glanced at the names of the Mexicans on the register, but as they were unfamiliar he decided that the owners were either strangers or else passing under false names.

He was about to follow the landlord when the door again opened, and two men came in. One was an American, while the other, though plainly middle-aged, was but a boy in size, and his peculiar looks betrayed a strong sprinkling of Indian blood.

Both looked surprised at seeing Max; but they would have said nothing had not he addressed them.

He recognized the two men recommended by Alcalde Jones, and who had been sent south to look out for Ben Marcy on his way to Nuevo Madrid.

A short conversation showed that they had hung persistently on his track, watching over him when he knew nothing about it, and they would not have been so far behind this night had it not been for an accident which delayed them.

Max told of the new developments in the case, and when Solvo, the half-breed, had heard the story, he became anxious, and suggested that they go to Marcy at once.

They did this, and Max found his witness looking rather better than he expected, though still quite weak.

He was a bluff, heavily-built man, who showed signs of his military life; and, when he heard that he was hunted by Barstow's men, he would have expressed himself forcibly and in a loud voice, had he not been prevented.

Solvo was the only one of the party who did not seem satisfied with the condition of affairs. He soon took Max aside, and expressed the opinion that the two Mexican lodgers were there to assassinate Marcy, and at his suggestion a trap was laid for them, in case his suspicions were correct.

Marcy was removed to the bed in an adjoining room, which connected with the first by a door, and then a dummy was skillfully made by the half-breed, and placed where he had first been.

After that, what little noise they had made ceased, and darkness was over the whole house. Max and his American ally had taken their quarters with Marcy, but Solvo crawled under the other bed, with only a pillow beneath him.

The night wore on and the storm still howled outside. No such night had been seen in that region for a long time. The rain descended furiously, driven by the wind, and between the two the old hotel groaned dismally.

Max had availed himself of half of Marcy's bed, and as he was thoroughly wearied he soon fell asleep.

When he awoke, it was to find a hand on his shoulder.

"Easy, mister—easy!" said the voice of his American ally. "Ali is lovely, I reckon, but thar has been a leetle rumpus in t'other room, an' I thort you would want ter investigate."

While the man spoke he had been striking a match, and by the time Max was on his feet, the flame had been communicated to a lamp.

Just then there was a tap on the door, and Max opened it to see Solvo.

"I was right, senior," said the half-breed, as quietly as though speaking of a trivial matter.

"Ha! has there been an attempt?"

"One of the Mexicans came in and thrust his knife through the dummy, but I was there."

The quiet remark did not prepare Max for what he saw when Benson advanced with the light.

Upon the floor lay the body of a man whose dress and features were strongly Mexican—his body, only, for it needed but one glance to show Max that he was done with life.

Across his breast lay Solvo's knife, but its blade was no longer bright.

Max had not expected such summary work, but when he had heard the half-breed's story, he said no more. The Mexican, who was none other than the man Benito, had entered through the door and crept to the bed, and, seeing what he thought to be a man thereon, had driven his knife to the hilt in the dummy.

It was his last stroke, for the sleepless Solvo had seen all, and before he could turn, the half-breed had seized him and struck home in a manner equally prompt.

Another of Barstow's assassins had met a fitting end, but when they looked for his accomplice, they found that he had fled.

Marcy had not been awakened by the affair, and as it was useless to alarm him, they said nothing about the tragedy, and Solvo and Benson quietly interred the body.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE WRECK OF THE WATER WITCH.

MORNING dawned and the inmates of the hotel were soon astir. Marcy was feeling much stronger, and he laughed at the precautions the other men had taken in removing him, for he believed the Mexicans had been but honest travelers, but had they led him to the grave made in the small hours, he would have been less skeptical.

Max had expected to start for Nuevo Madrid immediately after breakfast, but their horses were not ordered. The storm had not ceased, and he knew it would be imprudent for Marcy to go out in the rain and wind.

The hotel-keeper, after announcing that he was a weather-prophet, declared that the sun would shine before noon, and Max resolved to wait.

He had resolved to keep with Marcy if possible.

It was destined that the forenoon should have its element of interest, however, for, not long after breakfast, the men of the village were seen going down to the water, defying the storm, and none of the hotel party were surprised when news came that a vessel was in sight, in evident distress, and driven toward the rocky coast.

The news was so interesting to Max, that he decided to go with the crowd and see that sight which is at once the grandest and most terrible of coast life.

Enveloped in a *serape* loaned him by the hotel keeper, he went down to the shore. The rain was no longer falling so persistently as before, but the wind was blowing with as much fury as ever and the white mountains of water broke on the rocky shore with great violence.

Fifty men had preceded Max to the spot and all were looking out over the white whirlpool of waters to where a vessel struggled helplessly against odds.

The cavalier's first glance showed him that the craft was a topsail schooner, and then she disappeared for a while in a trough of the sea.

"I take it those men are in great danger," he said, to a stout man near him.

"Right you are," was the reply, "an' never a chicken on 'em will see another night."

"Is it so bad as that?"

"Don't you see they're drivin' straight onter ther rocks?"

"What is to hinder their working down the coast and making Horseshoe Harbor?"

"Fu'st of all, I reckon ther schooner is about gone ter pieces. She seems about as helpless as a tub, an' it's likely she has sprung a leak. Next, no sails could hang in such a gale; they'd be tored inter ribbons."

"Well, if they are helpless, how is it about us? Can't we aid them?"

The man looked at his questioner as though he thought he had gone crazy.

"Do you s'pose a boat could live in them waters?" he demanded, pointing to the white succession of billows.

"No; it would be flung back to land before it had gone twice its length. I can see that, but is there no other way?"

"None at all. Them critters is doomed, jest assure as shootin'. Ther schooner are goin' ter smash on ther rocks, an' it's likely most o' ther men will do the same. Some on 'em may reach shore alive, but I wouldn't give a short bit fur their chances."

Max looked more earnestly at the schooner. She was nearer than before, terribly near when the lives of those on board were considered, and each billow that lifted her on its feathery crest bore her further forward.

Suddenly the cavalier started. He was not a sailor, and to him all schooners looked alike, but in this imperiled craft he saw some strangely familiar points.

Waiting until she arose from a trough of water, he looked keenly and could no longer doubt.

The schooner was the Water Witch.

Surprised and anything but pleased, he stood and watched the laboring vessel. He had hoped to some day seize the craft, men and all, and force from them the secrets of the Black League, but it now seemed as though no mortal ears would hear their confession.

Stirred into new life by the thought, he mingled with the men and offered generous awards to such as would help to save the crew, if not the schooner, but all echoed the words of the first speaker. Under God there was no help for them. If it was His will that they should escape with their lives, it would be so, but if ten thousand men stood on the shore they would be helpless.

Convinced at last, Max wrapped his *serape* closer around him and prepared to watch to the end.

The crisis was not far away. The schooner was so near that, despite the spray which was beating over her deck, men could be seen here and there. They undoubtedly saw the crowd on the land; at any rate they saw the fate in store for them; but bravery or despair kept them from making a gesture.

Silently they awaited the result.

All of the old buoyancy was gone from the Water Witch; almost as unwieldy as a water-soaked log, she drove straight on to her doom.

Pity enough was expressed for her crew, and there were men there who would have risked all had it been possible for a boat to live in such a mad chaos of water; but, as they had said to Max, the result lay beyond their midst.

The fatal moment grew nearer. The schooner was approaching the deadliest part of the coast for miles north and south. Once let her be dashed on the pointed rock which lay in her very path and she would be held as in a vise and soon washed in pieces.

Nearer yet, and then the watchers held their breath.

Up on a gigantic billow arose the doomed craft, hovering between sea and earth, as it were, and then, with a crash which was audible even on the shore, she was dashed upon the rocks.

She went no further; the sharp points had pierced her hull, and, firmly wedged, she awaited the next billow.

It came, sweeping her deck clear of everything, and when it had passed on the doomed men had vanished also.

The watchers knew where to look for them, and in a long line they stood as near as the breaking waters would allow. Dead or alive, they were sure to be driven ashore.

Very soon they were dimly seen, advancing nearer and nearer, until at last the first was cast on the rocky beach.

Quickly the body was borne back beyond the water's reach—the body only, for the man's life had been dashed out on the cruel rocks.

Others came, one after another, but all dead, but Max Baldwin's gaze had become fixed upon

one man who was among the last and who was plainly still alive. He was making a gallant fight for life, and all hoped he might succeed.

Nearer he came, and at the proper moment, resolved to save him from the final shock, Long-Haired Max dashed into the billow, regardless of danger, and grasped the man by the collar.

There was a moment of suspense, for there was danger that the billow would take both of them back when it receded; but the cavalier's strength and courage triumphed, and he bore his prize well back.

Evidently, however, he had not rescued him unhurt, for he lay a dead weight in his arms. Looking down at the face he recognized Turner, the mate of the craft, and his eagerness to hear him talk was increased.

He, at least, would know all the secrets of the Black League.

Placing him gently on the ground, he looked for his injuries. The mate lay with closed eyes, and yet not wholly insensible—no, one look at his wounds told the cavalier that it was the half-stupor which precedes death.

One of the other men handed over a whisky-flask; and then as they went to look for fresh victims, he was left alone with the dying man.

He managed to pour a quantity of the liquor down his throat, and then the heavy eyelids moved back.

"I'm dying," gasped Turner.

"What can I do for you?" tersely, but sympathetically asked Max.

"Nothing," groaned the mate.

"Haven't you friends?"

"Yes; oh, merciful Heaven, yes! but they must never hear from me. It would kill them to know what I have been. Let me die and leave no sign."

"You can do one good deed before you go. Tell me of the Black League."

Turner did not answer. His eyes had closed, and he seemed far gone on the road to the other world.

Max shook him by the arm.

"Awake—arouse!" he cried. "Tell me of Captain Peters. What is the Black League?"

The lids opened, and the man looked at Max with glazing eyes. He was near to death, but there was still a gleam of intelligence.

"The Black League—Barstow—the ruined mission!" he faintly gasped, and then his jaw fell and his eyes closed.

"Dead!" muttered Max. "Dead, and the secret is untold. Perhaps—"

He ceased as, greatly to his surprise, Turner started upon his elbow. His face had grown bright and energetic, and his strength was surprising.

"All hands on deck!" he shouted, in a distinct voice.

It was the last effort of his life. As the final word passed his lips, he collapsed entirely and fell back in a heap, really dead at last.

With all hands at their stations, he had run his bark through the mystic portals which lie between life's ocean and the world beyond.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE ALCALDE DECLARES WAR.

THE cavalier had arisen when convinced that Turner was past speech, but he stood looking at him in deep thought. Oh! that another minute of life had been granted the man that he might have told the secret of the Black League.

Yet, he had told something.

"The Black League—Barstow—the ruined mission!"

The words, few as they were, revealed a good deal. They said, in substance, "Barstow is connected with the Black League, and the old mission plays a part in the drama;" and Max resolved to seek for the secret as soon as he reached Nuevo Madrid.

He was about turning away from the mate when a warning cry from a man near at hand caused him to wheel suddenly.

He was none too soon.

Above him towered a man in whose hand glittered a long knife, and when the cavalier sprung out of reach it was too late for the would-be assassin to arrest his stroke.

His arm descended, and, meeting only empty air, he staggered forward a few paces. By that time Max had recovered his wits, and, recognizing in the man a Mexican named Felipe, whom he knew to be one of Barstow's tools, he struck one straight blow and stretched the fellow senseless on the ground.

A series of shouts arose from the man.

"He tried to kill you, stranger!"

"Shoot ther critter!"

"Hang him!"

The cries were very appropriate, for Felipe had been a vile wretch, and the man whose life he had attempted to take was not more merciful than those who shouted.

Indignant at the attempt on his life, Long-Haired Max seized the fellow, and, raising him high above his head, cast him into a receding billow.

Back from the shore he was swept, as helpless as a child, and when the next wave cast him ashore, he was past doing mischief.

Another of Barstow's assassins had met a deserved end.

Besides his body, those of twelve other men lay on the shore—the entire crew of the schooner, with the exception of Captain Peters—and all were dead.

Out on the rock, only a remnant of the Water Witch was visible, a fragment from which rose a single mast, like a gravestone of the men who had died in the service of the Black League.

Little by little, the doomed vessel was giving way to the billows which broke upon her with crushing force, and as Long Haired Max realized that no more could be learned, he went back to the hotel.

The rain had ceased and the wind was rapidly losing its force, so it was decided to leave San Lopez at once. Accordingly, their horses were ordered, and Max, Marcy, Solvo, and Benson started for Nuevo Madrid.

The journey was made without accident, but the weakness of Marcy made their progress so slow that it was nearly noon when the town was reached.

Max saw his friends safely at the hotel, and then went to the office of Alcalde Jones.

His honor was seated at his table, smoking with a fury which even astonished Max. Mr. Jones always made a business of smoking, but this time he was unusually active.

"Durnation wildcats! be you 'round ag'in?" he demanded. "I'd begun ter think you had been assassinated like Brutus by the Goths an' Hungarians. Tell me what's b'en did."

The cavalier obeyed, but made his story as short as possible, for he knew very well that the alcalde had something to relate in turn.

"I ain't surprised," said Mr. Jones. "This hyar business has reached a pint whar nothin' is s'prisin'. Desolation is let loose on ther 'arth, an' ther American eagle is screamin' in fear. Ther R-public totters on her throne, an' personal liberty is goin' at a gallop ter durnation smash. Nobody is safe nowhar. You ain't, an' I ain't. Red-handed murder stalks inter ther very heart o' my jewrisprudence, an' shakes his gory locks almost in ther boodwah o' justice. Ther times are out o' j'int, an' it's a compound, confounded fractur!"

Long-Haired Max waited patiently for the alcalde to finish his eloquent remarks.

"If there is a fracture," he then said, "I think you and I are the men to set the broken bone."

"Right you are, my boyee, right you are. Ve'll soothe ther screamin' eagle, garter up our loins, an' go forth ter rule or ruin. We'll establish ther rack an' gullytine, an' make ther Tiger run red as frothin' wine. From this proximo we will inaugurate a reign o' terror an' slash an' kill indiscriminably."

"Having settled that point, tell me what has happened," said Max, quietly.

The alcalde's countenance fell.

"Durnation wildcats! it breaks my heart ter divulge; but Castro an' Peters are both gone."

"Gone!" echoed Max.

"Yes," said Jones, sheepishly.

"How and when?"

"Last night was ther time, but how I don't know. Tennyrate, all I kin tell is that Castro got out o' ther jail by ther winder, unseen an' unheard by ther blue-coats, an' that somebody tuk Peters away by fust overpowerin' ther guard, an' then h'istin' him down a ladder."

Mr. Jones spoke very sheepishly, but to Max came a recollection of what Colonel Barstow had whispered to Castro at Casa Victoria.

"Have no fear; I will save you!"

Remembering this, he could not doubt the source from which the aid had come, and he knew Jones must be equally well informed.

"It strikes me," he said, "that Lieutenant Mellough must be a very reckless man. To his door belongs the blame for Castro's escape, for, of course, the man would not have slipped away without his connivance. I am really surprised that he should go so far."

"He's as bad as Barstow."

"In my opinion, weakness of mind is answerable for his follies. From the first I have been surprised to see such a person a government officer. He is weak, narrow-minded and vicious, and having resigned himself to the control of Barstow, who is willing to compromise him if he secures his own ends, the lieutenant does whatever the stronger minded villain suggests. He hopes his villainy will never be known at head-quarters, but I shall make it my business to lodge complaint against him. As for the escape of Castro and Peters, we suffer no great loss thereby."

"My officious dignity is wallerin' round in ther lowest depths o' infamy an' despair," said the alcalde, mournfully. "Sech a thing never happened in this hyar jewrisprudence afore sense I took ther helm."

"Have no fear, my dear sir, for—"

Max paused abruptly, as the door was pushed open, and a veiled lady entered. She at once uncovered her face, and the cavalier recognized Miss Smith.

The meeting was an agreeable one to both, and Max, interpreting her glance aright, went to the door and shoved the bolt.

"We are now free from intruders," he said, quietly.

She thanked him, and he then introduced her to the alcalde, adding that the latter was his confidant in all matters.

"I am ready to speak to all except the friends of James Barstow," she said. "How is your warfare progressing?"

"So well that the trap will be speedily sprung."

"The sooner the better. The American lieutenant was at the house this morning."

"Mellough?"

"Yes."

"Did you hear their conversation?"

"Rest assured I did. First of all, I heard them speak of two prisoners they aided to escape last night—men named Peters and Castro."

"We know them. Did Mellough confess his part?"

"He said in plain words that he entered Castro's cell and loosened the bars at the window, so they could easily be removed from the outside."

"Very good; we have him now. What has become of the prisoners?"

"Of Castro I know nothing, but Peters is concealed at the old mission."

Max was not surprised, but he allowed himself to look very much amazed.

"What place of concealment is there at the old mission?" he asked.

"There is a mystery about the place which I do not understand," she said, thoughtfully, "though I do know that Barstow has some secret haunt there. Is there not a chance for a hidden room?"

"There must be, for I have myself seen strange scenes within its walls. What it is I do not know, but I'll take my oath there is a most peculiar mystery about it."

"Can't you solve it?" Miss Smith asked.

"We can, and will."

"One thing more. To-night, the plotters spring some plot upon Don Ramon Victoria."

"To-night? Then we must indeed be up and doing. What is the plot?"

"I know nothing of its nature, but I do know that Barstow is confident that it will result in his complete triumph. 'To-morrow,' he said, to Mellough, 'Donna Inez shall be my promised wife or we will crush the whole family!'"

"Durnation wildcats!" interrupted the alcalde, "his brass is amazin'. Why, he is a perfect Cicero fur schemin'. Does he think he can ride rough shod over ther boodwah o' justice an' spread detestation an' misery through my hull jewrisprudence, as 'twere? No; he shall not do it. Ther American eagle is screamin' fer justice, an' justice shall be did if I hev ter hide ther non-combattants in ther bulrushes an' go out seekin' whom I may gnaw, like Moses did."

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE WEAVING OF THE WEB.

LONG HAIRD MAX was too much in earnest to notice that the alcalde was taking undue liberty with the history of Moses.

He spoke like one in a reverie.

"The case is now settled; to-night must see the ending of this affair. Barstow has run to the length of his rope, and if he is not the most utterly ruined man in Nuevo Madrid, when another day breaks, I am greatly mistaken. Mr. Alcalde, I shall not leave your office to-day."

"I'll give you a life-lesse, officiously signed," said Mr. Jones, "but I'd like ter know why. Is it ter keep out o' Barstow's sight?"

"Yes, I am sure the news of my return has not gone abroad, and as he scattered his assassins so plentifully over the San Lopez trail, he has reason to believe me dead. I'll keep out of sight, and when the trap is sprung his presence therein will be sure."

"I have now told all I know," said Miss Smith, "unless you care to hear why I hate James Barstow."

It was just what Max did wish to hear, and he said as much.

"My name is not Smith, but Ellen Arnold," she said, sadly. "My sister married Barstow six years ago, and the union wrecked both our lives. You know the man well enough so that when I say he soon tired of her and allowed his hatred full play, you may gather some idea of the life she was compelled to lead. It would drive me mad to dwell upon it; suffice to say she bowed unresistingly before his cruelty and, little by little, her reason gave way and she became insane."

The narrator paused for a moment to recover her composure, and during the interval even the alcalde had the delicacy not to interrupt her sorrow with words.

For two years," continued Miss Arnold, "my unfortunate sister has been confined in a padded room of Barstow's house and I have been her keeper. During the greater part of the time she has been but gloomy and sad—though her past was entirely gone—but at times she had violent attacks which made the padding of the room necessary. Do not ask me to dwell upon the subject; enough to say that she has now gone from earthly troubles. This evening,

at twilight, she will be secretly consigned to the earth, and then—and then—"

"What then?" Max gently asked.

"Vengeance!" almost whispered the unhappy woman, but there was a thrilling inflection in her voice.

"We are together," said Max, in a deep voice while the alcalde, feeling uneasy in spite of himself, bit off a tremendous piece of tobacco and then began working his jaws like machinery.

A short time after, Miss Arnold departed, but as Max opened the door for her, Tim Foley glided in.

"Begorra," said the Irishman, "I have found out something av importance. I have see'd dhat spalpeen av a Castro at dhe ould mission."

"Tell us all about it," said Max, quickly.

"Dhere is little to tell, but I'm sure I sade him at dhe gate. I wint dhre directly, but diivil a sign av him could I foind."

"It is enough," said Max, calmly. "We now know where he is, and he shall yet confess that Don Ramon is not concerned in his plot."

The trio were still talking when the door again opened and, to their surprise, a man in the uniform of an American major entered.

He was a man who had seen fifty years of life, and from his bearing one would have said he was a veteran soldier.

"Is Mayor Jones here?" he courteously asked, after a glance about the room.

"He ain't nowhar else," said that gentleman. "I hev ther honor o' bein' ther mayor an' alcalde o' this hyar jewrisprudence."

The visitor smiled slightly.

"I am Major Eaton, of the United States army," he said, "and I have come to this town to take charge of the troops now here under a subordinate officer. Can you tell me where I may find them?"

"Do you refer to Mellough's command?" Max quickly asked.

"I do, sir."

"Then we can, indeed, tell you something about them—a good deal, in fact. But, sir, suppose we should tell that which is not creditable to Mellough?"

"In any case, I am his superior officer."

The answer was not very direct, but Max had been reading this gray-haired soldier to the extent of his ability, and he was sure he detected more under the quiet answer than the surface revealed.

"Please be seated, Major Eaton," he said. "We have a story to tell to you which I think will be of interest to you."

That evening, shortly after dusk, six persons left the house of Colonel Barstow. Four of them were servants, who bore a long, narrow box between them, and the others were the colonel and Miss Arnold.

They went directly to a grove a hundred yards distant, and there the box was consigned to a grave which had been awaiting it. 'Twas the burial of the deceased wife of the plotter.

Afterward, all returned to the house. At the door, Barstow turned to Miss Arnold and spoke for the first time.

"I would like to see you in my room," he said, with icy calmness.

"You shall wait but a few minutes," she replied, with equal calmness.

Going directly to her own chamber, she removed her outer garments, and then, going to a dressing-case, drew forth a revolver.

"Who knows what he may try to do?" she murmured.

Thrusting the weapon into her pocket, she went at once to Barstow's room. He had taken a chair and placed one for her, but in her present condition she noticed with suspicion that he had so arranged it that her back would be to the door.

Was it accident or design?

Resolved to protect herself, she thought quickly, and, seeing a large looking-glass nearly opposite the door, moved her chair before sitting down and had everything to her liking.

The door was distinctly revealed in the glass. "I wish to speak of the future," said Barstow, abruptly, as she sat down. "The bond between us is now severed."

"It is," she said, steadily.

"Such being the case, it is advisable that we should separate as soon as possible; I do not wish to have any one about me that is a reminder of the past."

"Naturally," she said, with quiet sarcasm.

"There is an ample field for women of your tact and energy in San Francisco. To-morrow morning you shall leave this house with a good horse to convey you, and a thousand dollars in your pocket. You will have no difficulty in reaching San Francisco."

"You are very kind," was the tranquil reply.

Barstow looked at her keenly. He had expected a contemptuous refusal of his offer, and her manner aroused his suspicions.

"Then you accept?"

"I certainly do; it is more than I expected."

The colonel twisted his fingers mechanically in his watch-chain. He could not understand his companion. For three years only bitter

words had passed between them. She had reproached him for harshness before, and indifference after, his wife lost her reason. At times, she had even threatened him. Could it be she had now become won over by an offer of money? The idea would create a suspicion that the most puritanical are slaves to Mammon, but Barstow suspected a sting behind the honey.

While he was hesitating, uncertain how to proceed, the door suddenly opened behind Miss Arnold. Quickly she looked in the glass, her movement escaping Barstow's attention because he had as quickly looked toward the door.

Miss Arnold was surprised, for on the threshold, hesitating as though uncertain whether to advance or not, stood Eduardo Castro.

The colonel started, looked annoyed and made a quick gesture, and at the movement the Mexican stepped back and softly closed the door.

When Barstow again turned toward his companion, she met his gaze calmly, showing in no way that she had seen anything of importance.

She further perplexed him by asking his advice as to where she had better stop when in San Francisco, but he answered quietly.

The interview soon ended and she left the room.

"Hang the woman!" muttered the colonel. "I don't understand her at all. There is nothing strange about that, for all women are riddles, but here she is going back on her record. Has the money won her, or what is the mystery? Not having any means of knowing, I'll watch well while she stays."

Going out, he opened another door and cautiously spoke Castro's name. The Mexican came out of the darkness.

"Are you alone, at last?" he asked.

"Yes. You were premature in opening the door of my room, but it is all right. Come in now and we will arrange those flowers."

They went to the colonel's apartment and sat down, unconscious that they were watched through the key-hole by Miss Arnold.

Barstow poured liquor for both, Castro proposed, as a toast, the success of his host's plans, and then the latter went to one side and brought forward a basket of flowers.

Castro at once caught up a handful, began work and, under his skillful hands, they soon assumed the appearance of a bouquet.

Miss Arnold, watching at the door, wondered what new scheme Barstow had in view.

The latter had watched attentively, but made no comments until Castro finished.

"There!" said the latter, complacently, at the end. "The bouquet is finished, and the charming Miss Lingard will gladly press it to her aristocratic nostrils. I only wish I had the making of one for each of the family. Have you the liquid?"

Barstow produced a small vial which was filled with a colorless liquid. Castro removed the cork and touched the liquid to his tongue.

"It is correct," he then said. "Give these articles to Nina, but be very particular about giving your directions. Should she inhale much of this stuff she would herself be the victim. Tell her to first place the bouquet in a vase and then sprinkle on the poison and promptly leave the room. By the time the governess enters, the air will be so laden that she will soon be a corpse."

Miss Arnold shivered. The coolness with which this villainous plan was discussed horrified her, as well as she had before known Barstow.

She remained at her post and watched until the colonel finally started and declared that he must go to meet Mellough.

"First of all," he added, "I will show you to your room and tell you how to guard against possible molestation."

Then they came out, not seeing Miss Arnold, who had retreated to the shadows, but she had not failed to see that they left the poison on the table, and she quickly glided in and seized the vial.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE MYSTERY OF THE MISSION.

MISS ARNOLD had acted on the impulse of the moment in thus securing the vial; indeed, the fact that Barstow left it behind was so unexpected that she had no time for a coherent plan; she merely knew that the deadly liquid was destined to take the life of a fellow-being, and she was resolved to prevent it at all hazards.

With the vial once in her hand, she began to think more earnestly. It was easy enough to destroy it, for the glass was thin, but its loss might be replaced and the fact that it had disappeared would at once draw suspicion upon herself.

She saw a far better way.

Going quietly to the window, she raised it and poured the poison out at one motion. No scent arose, but even that act made her dizzy. Closing the window, she went back to the table. Upon it stood a glass of water, and it was the work of only a moment to fill the vial with that harmless article.

This done, she glided back into the hall.

Her movements had been made so quickly

that Barstow had not yet finished with Castro, but he soon came out and re-entered his own room.

Still watching, Miss Arnold saw him raise the vial and look at it steadily. Her heart beat quicker, for she feared he had discovered the tampering, but a smile soon crossed his face.

Undoubtedly he had looked at the drug with the same admiration he would have felt for a human assassin who could do his work surely, silently, mysteriously.

Miss Arnold, however, knowing that she had saved one victim glided back to her room.

Five minutes later, Barstow went out, and, not far behind him went his Nemesis. She followed until he reached the jail where Lieutenant Mellough always passed his evenings if not busy; and then she retraced her steps and entered the alcalde's office.

Half an hour later she was back at Barstow's house, accompanied by Max, Jones, Major Eaton and five private soldiers.

Entering cautiously, they were soon before the door of the room where Eduardo Castro had been quartered. Eaton turned the knob but the door was locked. He stepped aside, and like a flash the other soldiers dashed themselves against the door.

The shock burst off the hinges, and then, as the light of their lamps fell into the room, they saw Castro. He had just arisen from his chair, a look of alarm on his face.

He saw the men before him and made a leap for a revolver which lay on the bed, but the soldiers sprung through the doorway and seized him before he could touch the weapon.

He began a furious struggle, but with so many against him it was useless. He was brought out into the larger room and placed before Major Eaton. By that time his look of alarm had given place to the same obstinate one Max well remembered on a former occasion.

Would he once more refuse to talk?

"I hope you will pardon us, Senor Castro," said Eaton, politely. "We were somewhat at rapt, but it was because we knew the ways of brave men."

Castro laughed unmusically.

"Give me a revolver and I'll show you my way."

"Undoubtedly, but that is not what we wish. I am an officer of the United States Army and now in command at Nuevo Madrid. By following the directions I give you, you can win your liberty."

"Caramba! you are kind. Well!"

"First of all, was Don Ramon Victoria concerned in your conspiracy?"

"Yes, sir; he was."

"Is that a fact?"

"I will swear to it. Do you doubt me?"

"By no means," replied the major, politely.

"Having settled that point, we go to the second. Will you show us the entrance to the secret room of the old mission?"

Castro started violently. His face, too, showed surprise, if not more, and was equivalent to a confession.

"I do not know of any such room," he answered, after a brief pause.

"Pardon me," said Eaton, blandly, "but this is not the way to gain your freedom. You have been in that room, to-day. Why do you deny it? Can you not surmise that with my coming there has been a change at Nuevo Madrid? Mellough's day of power is over; his retirement from the army, in disgrace, is but a question of time. Captain Peters will be punished, while as for Barstow—well, it's a rope carnival for him. Be wise, Senor Castro; desert the sinking ship before you are doomed. Once more, I say, tell us all you know and you shall go free; refuse, and you shall go to San Francisco as a prisoner."

The soldier spoke earnestly, candidly, and Castro could not avoid being deeply impressed.

He could be stubbornly loyal when there was a motive, but with the tide running strongly in the other direction, he was another man.

Long-Haired Max had watched him closely, and as he marked the expression on his face, he felt sure they would win.

"You have no authority to make such a bargain," he replied, hesitatingly, to Eaton.

"Pardon me, but I have the authority, and I will use it. Work faithfully for us to-night, and you are a free man in the morning."

The Mexican looked at Max.

"Is this a trap?" he asked.

"Upon my word, no."

"Then I yield. I've had enough of this villainous business. Lead me to the old mission and I will show you the entrance to the den."

"What is the mystery of that place?" Max asked.

"That I do not know. I was never there until this morning, and before then I did not suspect the ruin to be anything more than it seemed from the outside."

"What did you see?"

"A small room, perhaps twelve feet square, directly under the mission, but there was another beyond it, and from there I heard the sound of men's voices."

"Have you any idea how many men are there?"

"Not the slightest. I had no chance to look through the door."

"And you know nothing of the Black League?"

"I never heard the name before."

Max believed that he was telling the truth and asked no more questions. The mystery of League was still unsolved, still puzzling and beyond his power of analysis, but once in the subterranean abode, and they would soon learn all.

The entire party, including Castro and Miss Arnold, left the house and hurried toward the mission. The work of vengeance was fairly in progress, and their female ally would not leave them until the end was reached.

On reaching the mission they found everything as quiet as before. Silence and darkness brooded over the crumbling pile and the broken walls had never looked more somber and forbidding.

They entered, and all eyes became fixed upon the Mexican. The test of his good faith was at hand.

For a moment he hesitated and they began to fear that he intended some trick, but, making allowance for the darkness, they gave him time.

He looked carefully at the fragments of masonry which strewn the floor. The broken pillars and shapeless blocks formed labyrinthine passages, and it was not easy for a novice to tread the right track; but he finally moved on and, after a short time, paused near the eastern wall.

"This is the spot," he said, confidently.

Max gained fresh courage. They were near where the ghostly monk and young girl had enacted their pantomime on the wall, and he felt sure all was progressing well.

Tim Foley uncovered the lantern, and as its light fell on the floor, Castro brightened perceptibly.

He stepped upon one edge of a square flagging stone and pressed as though he expected to see it turn. It remained motionless.

"Are we blocked?" Eaton asked.

"No, senor. Do what I tell you and all will be well. Under yonder broken pillar you should find a flat bar of iron. Look for it!"

Foley speedily produced the article.

"Now," continued the Mexican, "insert it between those two blocks and move it from side to side. There is some sort of a secret spring there."

Again he was obeyed, but though Tim worked faithfully, several minutes passed without result. Just as all were becoming impatient, a sharp click sounded.

"Ha!" cried Castro, "the way is now open. Step again on the square stone!"

Max obeyed, and at his touch the rock rolled half way over, remaining secure at the center, but leaving an opening through which a man could easily descend.

A damp current of air rushed up and all was darkness and silence below.

With the way at last open, the searching party wondered if they had done wisely to come with so small a force. Perhaps a score of desperate villains lurked in the darkness, ready to pour in a deadly volley, and they were but eight in number.

"I'll lead the way," said the alcalde, firmly. "Ther honor o' my jurisprudence must be hung onter ef ther eagle o' liberty is left a widder. Foller me ter ther beforum o' iniquity!"

His Honor moved boldly to the opening, and when Tim's lantern showed a number of regular steps, descended with a resolute air.

He had not fairly disappeared from view, however, before there was a sound from below which indicated that he had found some previous occupant. Tim, staring blankly, saw two objects engaged in a desperate encounter, but that was all he could tell.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE LAIR OF THE BLACK LEAGUE.

LONG-HAIRED MAX did not wait to see the result of the struggle, but, pushing Tim aside, leaped down into the pit and hastened to the alcalde's aid. It was a matter of great importance that no sound should arise to alarm those who might be inside, and he regretted that he had not led the way himself.

By the time he reached the ground Tim was also on the way, and the light of the lantern showed Mr. Jones and another man in a close grapple. The sinewy alcalde seemed to be holding his own well, and as Max saw his hand on his adversary's neck he knew why no alarm had been given.

Quickly adding his strength to that of his ally, the unknown was soon on his back and helpless. Max placed his knife at his neck and Jones removed his hand, for both wished to question him, but the fellow's eyes had closed and they saw that he was really insensible.

The alcalde's grasp had nearly choked out his life.

"Durnation wildcats!" said the victor, in a subdued voice, "I didn't know I was so thunderin' musk'ler. Purty business fur an alcalde an' victor. Ef any one presents a complaint, I'll hev ter fine myself fur unprovoked assault. That are is right; tote him up ter ther fresh air."

The stranger was carried above and then the party prepared for the next move in the game. Beyond them, on the south side, was a wall of masonry with an iron door which opened inward. The great question now became, was this door fastened?

Major Eaton tried it—it yielded to his touch. He pushed it open and saw another dark cavity, but at the further end a gleam of light appeared as from a crevice. They had reached a passage which was five feet wide, but at the further end was another room and there, doubtless, was the secret of the Black League.

Creeping forward they came to another door. The faint murmur of voices reached their ears; beyond was a lighted room—the lair of the Black Brethren.

Eaton called his men well to his side, and then the door was pushed open and the whole party marched through.

The gaze of Long-Haired Max flashed like lightning around him. He saw a room forty feet long and half as wide, and as it was well lighted he saw, too, the half dozen men who were seated near a fire and, evidently, deep in the mysteries of some game of gambling.

They at first looked up carelessly, but at sight of the intruders one and all sprung to their feet in alarm.

The crisis was at hand and Major Eaton did not hesitate. At his command the muskets of the soldiers came up promptly and a series of sharp clicks announced that they were ready for business.

"Halt there!" cried the major, sharply. "If you raise a hand my men will fire. You are my prisoners!"

The explanation was clear and decisive. The men of the cave were not cowardly of look, but their common sense told them that this gray-haired man in blue meant just what he said.

With the odds against them, it was clear that they must yield to the will of the invaders.

Having thus decided they began to think of their future.

"What does this hyar mean?" one of them asked.

"It means that your race is run."

"What do you mean, general? We ain't did nothin' wrong."

"Of course not!" Eaton sarcastically said.

"Then why are we arrested?"

"For high crimes and misendeavors!" cried the alcalde, pressing to the front. "You're charged with 'larin' tail-feathers out o' ther quiver o' the bird o' freedom, an' you're wanted in ther boodwah o' justice."

During this dialogue Long-Haired Max had been using his eyesight well, though he gained little information. The den was an old curiosity shop on a new scale. From end to end it was filled with articles of various kinds. Beds, clothing, cooking-utensils, tools and a great variety of other things, but still no light on the mystery of the Black League.

Is no distance away, however, he saw evidence that at least one man was in bed. A head was slightly raised, as though furtively surveying them, and Max was sure it was that of Captain Peters.

As the soldiers gathered around the late gamblers, the cavalier walked toward the bed and saw that he had indeed been right.

"How do you do, Captain Peters?" he blandly asked.

The man replied with a groan.

"What's the trouble?" Max continued. "Hope your change of hotels hasn't harmed you any."

The skipper looked at the soldiers and then back to Max.

"I'm runnin' on tew the breakers at ten knots to the hour," he answered, hoarsely. "That infarnal movin' did the business fur me; it brought on a hemorrhage, an' I'm a gone goose. I jedge from the looks o' things the hull business has gone tew the dogs, but I don't care a darn; I've got to skip fur my last v'y'ge right soon, whether or no."

There was little room to doubt the statement. The once bronzed face of the skipper had grown very pale, his cheeks were sunken, his eyes dim, and the hoarse voice in which he spoke was surely the forerunner of death.

"I'm sorry for you," Max mechanically said. "I blame nobody but myself. I've lived like a fool an' like a fool I must die. The wages o' sin is death. That's what I hearn the old minister preach when I was a boy, an' it comes home to me now. I ain't a coward, and I kin die with a straight face, but when I git intew the last harbor and they ask at the grand custom-house fur my log-book, what will there be in my favor? Nothin'; I've lived like a fool and like a fool I shall die."

While the skipper spoke, all the party had gathered about him, but he did not heed them. After the last word there was silence for a moment, but he suddenly looked at Max.

"I shall never see the Water Witch ag'in," he said.

"You certainly never will, for she has gone to her doom before you. This morning I was at San Lopez, and I saw the schooner driven on the rocks and then torn in pieces by the breaking billows."

Peters made an effort, and arose to his elbow.

"Do you mean the Water Witch?" he asked, with such evident distress that Max regretted having spoken.

"Yes. No two planks of her hull remain together."

"And the crew?"

Max hesitated.

"Tell the truth, messmate."

"They are all dead!"

Peters fell back on the pillow with a groan.

"Gone—all gone!" he muttered, hoarsely.

"Schooner, crew, captain! A curse was over all. Poor old schooner! poor old Water Witch! Yet it may as well be so. In any case, I should never tread her dock again. Yes, it is well that vessel and captain should float intew the last harbor on the same day."

The explorers were becoming impatient, but Max made gestures for them to wait. He wished to hear the story of the Black League from this man if possible; he would tell it clearer than the subordinates.

Suddenly he aroused again.

"I see the lightnin' has struck," he said. "You are in this den, an' it shows that Jim Barstow won't live tew crow over me."

"You will die a natural death; he will hang," said Max. "By the way, will you aid us by explaining the ways of this cave?"

"This room is only where the men live," said Peters. "Them passages you see yender lead tew the places where we hev dug the gold. What we hev got sence the schooner was blockaded outside has be'n buried somewhere—the men will show you. The jig is up, an' we may as wal strike our flag."

The dying skipper closed his eyes as though the conversation fatigued him and he wished to rest.

Max turned to the prisoners.

"Show us around the place," he said, as quietly as though he knew all about the League. And then, as they hesitated: "You shall not regret your course if you oblige us."

It was enough. The men, whatever their faults, were a grade better than cut-throats, and with the knowledge before them that ruin had come to their enterprise, they concluded that it was better to win what favor they could.

Accordingly, all volunteered to act as guides, and under their lead our friends explored the Black League's lair.

Only a few steps had been taken when they saw several picks leaning against the wall.

"What are these for?" Eaton asked.

"To dig the gold."

"Do you mean that the old monks left a treasure here?"

"No; it is unmined gold."

Light began to dawn on the cavalier's mind. He followed the guides closely, and was led along a narrow passage for a hundred feet. Then they came upon the scene of extensive mining operations. The men had worked in every direction, and honeycombed the hill.

"I see nothing lawless about this," said Eaton.

"You forget," answered Max, dryly, "that we are on the premises of Don Ramon Victoria."

"Ha! I see now. The veil of mystery lifts."

The whole of the excavation was visited, but nothing except the abundant evidence of mining was found, and at last they went back to the main room to hear the story of Captain Peters. They felt sure he would talk.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE SPRINGING OF THE TRAP.

COLONEL BARSTOW had laid his plans for the closing act in his drama with all possible skill. Of late, in tracing the fortunes of his enemies, we have so lost sight of the plotters that his own efforts have been presented in an unfavorable light.

Because perseverance and luck had overthrown his side-plays, it does not follow that they were poor, and in going to Casa Victoria that evening for the grand finale he did not suspect that misfortune was at his heels.

So far as the drama on the cliff was concerned, which began with the decoy signal and ended with the violent death of Buck Egan, he believed that he had kept all knowledge of the affair from his enemies by killing Buck.

Again, as he had not known of the return of Long-Haired Max, or the arrival of Marcy, he had reason to believe both had been killed by his agents, while he relied on the little vial to silence Miss Lingard.

By this explanation it will be seen that he had no reason to apprehend trouble when he presented himself at Don Ramon's residence that evening.

Lieutenant Mellough, too, believed himself gliding over a tranquil sea, metaphorically speaking. No whisper of the arrival of Major Eaton had reached him, and when he that evening left the jail and walked to the casa, his head was high in the air, and he did not once remember that it was only at a second measuring that he had been pronounced tall enough to serve as a soldier.

On entering the house he received the usual

hospitable treatment from Don Ramon and his daughter, but both of them seemed ill at ease. They talked with less animation than usual, and the don in particular seemed moody and restless, but if Mellough noticed the fact he made no sign.

He ate and drank with his usual good appetite, and then excused himself and went to his own room.

Father and daughter looked at each other with gloomy faces.

"The hanging sword must now fall," said the former, huskily.

"He may not discover it until to-morrow," said Donna Inez, like one who catches at a straw.

"That is but delaying the inevitable. Sooner or later he will discover that the papers have been tampered with, and the guilt will be clearly fixed. Inez, my child, I have made a fatal mistake. Already I see the disgrace that awaits me. Mellough's statement will heap disgrace upon disgrace. It would have been far better had I submitted to my lot and relied on my assertion that the documents were forgeries. Now, by tampering with them, I have tacitly admitted my guilt."

Don Ramon's voice was husky and his face worked strangely. Pride, dignity and firmness had given place to fear, misery and weakness.

"The acid may not have taken effect," Inez suggested.

"It is a useless hope. Colonel Barstow assured me he knew its power well. Yes, the deed is done, and in place of the compromising papers, Mellough has now only blank documents. All this would be well enough, did he not know their character. As it is, I am ruined and disgraced!"

Victoria abruptly arose and began pacing the room, but Donna Inez went to his side and placed her arm about his neck.

"Be brave, my father," she said, "for are we not left to each other?"

"How long will it be so?" he gloomily asked. "It may be I shall be torn from you and imprisoned. In Mexico, my crime would be my ruin. Mellough can say, 'This man has conspired against the government: he has destroyed the proofs of his guilt.' Is not that enough to condemn me?"

"They can not prove that you destroyed the proof."

"It makes no difference, since it was done in my house."

At this moment Colonel Barstow was announced, and he soon entered, calm, smiling and wholly at his ease.

He greeted them as usual and then looked keenly at their faces.

"You seem gloomy," he said. "I trust that nothing unfavorable has occurred. What of the papers?"

"I have used the acid," said Don Ramon, gloomily.

"Good! Then the writing has disappeared, and you are no longer in danger," said the colonel, with a look of joy. "I congratulate you, Don Ramon."

"You forget that Mellough has read them."

"What of that? His proof is gone."

"His word will condemn me."

"Not at all, my dear senor. He will not dare to mention the fact. Should he do so, he will only bring blame upon himself. He left his papers openly in his room, to-day, while he went away, did he not? Very good; he will not dare to confess such carelessness as that. It would be his own ruin."

This was a view of the case which neither of the Victorias had before taken, but it was so convincing that their faces brightened perceptibly. Evidently, the lieutenant had made himself liable to censure, and it might be he would hide their work to conceal his own folly.

"Rely on me," continued Barstow, who had not failed to see their change of countenance, "and all will be well. Of course, none of us like the work, but your future must not be ruined by forged papers. You have a daughter."

The cunning words at once softened and hardened Don Ramon's heart. He remembered the brilliant career he had planned for Donna Inez, for whom alone he lived, and for a while he felt that the sacrifice was not in vain. As deeply as he would be pained at a flaw in his own honorable record, the prosperity of Inez arose superior to all.

"You may be right," he said.

"Rest assured I am, and let your conscience be easy. I never yet advised a man to do a wrong act, and it is but justice to overthrow what is false. You are right in destroying the papers."

"We owe our safety to you, colonel."

"Partially, I admit."

"We have carried out your ideas to reach this result. Believe me, sir, I am deeply grateful."

"My heart has been in the work," said the plotter, bowing low.

At this moment the door was flung open, and Lieutenant Mellough appeared to view. He looked flushed and angry, and in one hand he held several papers which had an ominous look.

Don Ramon and his daughter lost color. They plainly read in the lieutenant's excited face the fact that he had discovered the tampering with his cherished documents.

He stood for a moment as though striving to regain his calmness, and then, leveling his finger at Victoria, exclaimed:

"I have discovered your perfidy, sir!"

Instantly the head of the don was thrown back in the air, and his eyes flashed angrily. For a moment he forgot everything except the fact that this man had dared to apply an offensive word to him—a Victoria.

"My perfidy! What do you mean, sir?"

"Simply that you have proved your guilt in this conspiracy business by committing a crime. At last I know the boasted hospitality of a Spaniard!"

Two forward strides the don made, while his impressive form seemed to arise to still greater stature, and he towered above the little lieutenant like a veritable giant.

"Silence!" he thundered. "I will not be insulted in my own house. Dare to cast another slur upon the race to which I belong and I will throw you from the window. Whatever you have to say, speak plainly, and at once. The verdict will come later, but never from your hands. Do not confound your identity with that of your superiors!"

Looking at the two men, and hearing Don Ramon speak, one would have expected to see Mellough sink into nothingness, but, instead, he grew red with indignation, his scanty side-whiskers seemed to quiver with anger, and he waved one hand tragically.

"Whatever I seem in your eyes, I am an officer of the United States army, and my country shall be allowed to choose between us. When you are behind prison bars, you may wish you had been less insolent."

"Insolent!—to you?"

Don Ramon made a disdainful gesture, which sent Mellough's fury up to the boiling pitch. The Spaniard's manner seemed to say, "Can one be insolent to the worm which crawls across his path?"

Donna Inez, however, saw that her father had entirely forgotten their danger, and alarmed at his rashness, she went to his side, laid her hand on his arm, and whispered so that only he could hear:

"Be calm, my father; you will make our situation worse."

It was enough. Don Ramon remembered where he stood, and, crushing back his pride, lowly said:

"I have been hasty, and I beg your pardon, sir. Will you be seated and explain what you mean?"

"I will explain, but I will not be seated," said Mellough, shrilly. "Your house is no longer a proper place for me to rest, for you have betrayed every claim of hospitality and honor."

Don Ramon became very white, but by a great effort he restrained his anger.

"Explain," he briefly said.

"You have managed to destroy the value of these papers—you have poured something upon them which has extracted the ink."

"What papers are they?"

Mellough stamped his foot.

"Let us have no child's play. As you well know, they are those relating to the conspiracy. You have practically destroyed them, and, by my life, I will make you suffer for it."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE PLOT MADE PLAIN.

At this moment Barstow arose and moved forward.

"My dear lieutenant," he began, persuasively; but Mellough darted a furious look at him.

"Sit down; I will attend to you directly," he said, savagely. "Don Ramon Victoria, I accidentally left these papers in my room this evening. They contained the notes of the conspirators and their names. You have managed to extract the ink from them. What have you to say in defense?"

"Nothing, sir," was the calm reply.

"Oh, it is nothing, is it? Well, I will make you say something. Your crime will be stated to the highest officials of the United States."

"By whom?"

"By myself."

"Will it be safe for you?"

"Safe?"

"Yes, sir. A man who leaves such papers scattered about had better hold his tongue if harm comes to them. The weight of anger will fall on your own head."

Mellough smiled disagreeably.

"So it is on that fact that you rely? My dear sir, I am in no way compromised, while you have committed a blunder as well as a crime. The papers you destroyed were in no way valuable; they were merely copies which I had made to send to San Francisco. The originals still exist, the proof against you is irrefragable, and now, by my life, I'll push the case to the wall!"

Mellough swung the papers over his head in

high glee, looking like a triumphant farm-yard rooster, while the Victorias showed consternation, confusion and doubt.

"Your crime," continued the lieutenant, as no one spoke, "remains just as large and I shall make the most of it."

Once more Barstow arose.

"My dear sir," he said, "I beg that you will—"

"Ah! so you have a word to say," interrupted Mellough, with a sneer. "I am glad you are here, for I do not forget that you are an accomplice. I shall have two men to name in my report, one of whom is an ex-colonel—yourself!"

"Do you dare—" began Barstow, hotly.

"I dare to say there is an infamous plot against me. You have lied openly and disgracefully. It was you who decoyed me into this trap. You very well know that I would never have taken up my residence under this roof but for you. A lie brought me here. You said Senorita Victoria was your promised wife. From that moment dates the plot formed by you and Victoria. I was decoyed here so that you could destroy the proof which you knew would ruin Don Ramon if made public!"

"I solemnly declare—" again began Barstow, but once more he was interrupted.

"Declare nothing," said Mellough, violently. "You cannot turn justice from its course. I shall say to my superiors, 'Ramon Victoria is guilty of conspiring against the United States government, and of trying to destroy important papers.' Further than that, I shall say, 'James Barstow is guilty of aiding Victoria to destroy these papers; and I believe he, too, is a conspirator.' These statements will ruin you both; you will be thrown into prison, disgraced, dishonored."

Barstow's face was gloomy, but he folded his arms with an air of dignity.

"I am an old soldier; my country will not forget that," he said.

"Bah! I'll bet a year's pay you will be stripped of your wealth and banished from the country perhaps; shot like a dog."

Don Ramon moved excitedly forward.

"Colonel Barstow is no traitor; I can swear to it," he said.

"At least, he has conspired with you."

For a moment the Spaniard hesitated.

"He has not," he then said, firmly.

"Let me test the matter. He made a statement at the beginning of this case which subsequent events do not seem to prove. He stated that Donna Inez was his promised wife. Is that true?"

The critical moment in the plot had come, and Barstow and Mellough looked at Don Ramon with eagerness they could not wholly conceal. The case had been carefully and skillfully worked up a point where Victoria must surely be saying to himself, "It is for me that my neighbor is about to suffer; his devotion to my interests has led him into trouble," and the plotters counted on the don's well-known lofty sentiments of honor and generosity to force him on to the proper point.

In so doing, they did not, however, remember that above all things earthly arose his love for his daughter. His own interests he would gladly have periled to save Barstow, but, even in that critical moment, he remembered the vague doubts he had at times felt in regard to the colonel.

Was it safe to formally declare an engagement between the two?

While he hesitated, Donna Inez moved forward. She had been stirred to such a pitch of nervousness by this remarkable scene that she was not in a mood to count the cost of anything.

"It is true!" she firmly said, in reply to Mellough's question.

Barstow breathed freer, but there was still a step to be taken.

"Prove it!" cried the lieutenant.

"Is not my word sufficient proof?" demanded the girl, haughtily.

"I do not dispute it, but there is one thing which will settle all questions. I have a chaplain among my men; let me send for him to marry you two and I will no longer say there is a plot!"

The decisive moment had come.

Barstow was looking at father and daughter with burning eyes. What would they say to such a proposal?

Both started, and Don Ramon opened his lips to speak, but though his lips moved his voice was not heard. Donna Inez, however, uttered a faint cry.

"Not that! not that!" she gasped.

"I thought the announcement a sham," sneered the lieutenant.

Once more Barstow strode to the front.

"Sir," he said, "I resent this interference with our private affairs. You are going too far."

"I made no demands," said Mellough, coolly; "I only give you a choice of two paths. Upon your decision depends my own course. My sensitive nature is in arms against my generosity. Prove to me that I have misjudged you and I will throw every compromising paper in the fire. The hospitality I have received in

this house touches me deeply; prove that you have been sincere and I will never mention your name or that of Don Ramon in my report."

"Any other proof—" began Barstow, but the lieutenant interrupted him.

"There can be but one way of proof. Shall I send for the chaplain?"

There was a dead silence, but Mellough drew another package of papers from his pocket and spoke again.

"Here are the proofs which I despise as much as any of you," he said. "Heaven forbid that I should be obliged to ruin you all, but my sensitive nature demands some proof. It is not for me to aid you; you can save yourselves."

Barstow felt that his whole future was at stake and he was worked up to a pitch of excitement strange for one of his usually cool manner. Eagerly he scanned the faces of the Victorias. Inez was very pale, troubled, confused and uncertain. Don Ramon was equally affected, but a fixed purpose gradually appeared in his face, and he advanced a step.

"Lieutenant Mellough," he steadily said, "you are presumptuous, even to impertinence. No man, sir, has a right to dictate to a Victoria. You say your papers are intact. Very well; I thank Heaven that it is so. There is no stain on the name I bear, and by the help of Divine Power I will see that none comes to it. You may make whatever use of the papers you choose, but you shall not dictate to us. My daughter, sir, is not to be bought, sold or bribed. One may be manly even in misfortune, and, despite my present distress, I am still a Victoria!"

Having uttered these words with a calmness, subdued power and grandeur worthy of a Roman senator, Don Ramon drew his fine form to its utmost height and stood like a bulwark of his daughter's happiness.

They were the death-blow of Colonel Barstow's hopes. Had ten thousand men appeared to swell the cry, he would not have been more convinced, and as he saw his air-castles crumbling away into utter ruin, a terrible rage seized upon him.

Before another word could be said, however, the door opened without ceremony and several persons entered, two by two.

First came Alcalde Jones and Major Eaton, then Long-Haired Max and Eduardo Castro, then Tim Foley and Marcy, and behind them were men whose clothing was of blue.

The previous occupants of the room looked with varied feelings, but the alcalde walked straight to Colonel Barstow's side.

"By civil an' uncivil authority, I arrest you!" said Mr. Jones with dignity.

The colonel breathed heavily and his eyes wavered for a moment, but his composure speedily returned.

"Upon what charge?" he tersely asked.

"Wal, ther items is so durned numerous that it w'd require a cistern o' book-keepin' on ther double-entry plan ter enumerate all, but I'll try ter give a symphony."

"First: Fur murderin' one Ernest Baldwin."

"Nextly: Fur murderin' one Buck Eagan."

"Secondly: Fur tryin' ter kill one Max Baldwin."

"Ninthly: Fur robbin' one Ramon Victoria."

"Finally: Fur high crimes an' misendeavors o' a general an' convex nature, all with malicious forethought."

CHAPTER XL

THE SWORD FALLS.

COLONEL BARSTOW had listened attentively to this formidable arraignment, but his gaze had not been on the speaker. Instead, he had been looking about the room, and, seeing Long-Haired Max, Marcy, Captain Peters, Miss Lingard and Miss Arnold, he knew very well that the day of doom had come.

It was a terrible blow, but he made his resolutions instantly. Moving back a pace, he lifted a chair and then sat down by the wall where no one could approach him unseen.

"It strikes me," he said with remarkable coolness, "that there are a few other crimes known to the world which you might pile on my head, but you must of course suit yourselves."

"Bein' in my own jewrisprudence, I shall sartainly do so," the alcalde replied. "I don't want ter swamp ther boodwah o' justice, so I go light, but I intend ter present this hyar case that ther American eagle will scream whole cantatas o' joy an' tar its gown inter ribbons."

Major Eaton advanced to Don Ramon's side.

"My dear senor," he said, kindly, "I wish to put you at once at your ease, so let me say there is not one charge against you. Such as have been made are confessedly false, and there is not a stain on the name of Victoria."

"Tell that to Mellough," said Barstow with a reckless laugh.

"Lieutenant Mellough is done with this case," said Eaton, coldly.

The lieutenant was the picture of dismay and terror. Pale, trembling and overwhelmed, he was too much unmanned to either attempt flight or to speak.

"Naturally, we all wish this scene ended as

soon as possible," said Eaton. "Captain Peters, tell us what you know of the Black League."

The former captain of the Water Witch was brought forward on the impromptu stretcher on which he had been conveyed to the casa. His appearance was ghastly, but the excitement had given him a strength greater than he possessed when in the den under the old mission.

"It may be cowardly tew go back on a mess-mate," he said, abruptly, "but I'm goin' tew dew one good deed afore I cast off my grapp'in' irons on the world. I'm an old sailor; I've follored the sea ever sence I was ten year old; an' I've done a heap o' mischief in my day. Durin' the Mexican war I got acquainted with Jim Barstow, an' we l'arnt each other's ways, an' when we met in San Francisco, a year ago, he made a proposition."

"Said Barstow, 'I'm livin' neighbor tew one Don Ramon Victoria. On his ranch stands the ruins o' an old mission, long sence deserted, but I happen tew know that the sile under the mission is rich with gold. I discovered this when I chanced to discover an underground room, but the knowledge rests with me alone. Now, I have, of course, no right to this gold, since it is on Victoria's land, but I have formed a plan by which it may go to me an' the men I take tew my confidence.' He laid the plan afore me, an' I accepted."

The skipper paused for a drink of water, and then continued:

"Our plan was soon in force, and half a dozen men were introduced under the mission an' systematic mining operations begun. At first there was dirt tew be got rid on, but it was carted tew the water by night, an' sech skill used that nobody suspected anything, while the revival o' the ghost business kept away the Mexicans."

"The secret mine paid rich, an' Barstow made a pile o' money off 'm Don Ramon's property. Now comes my part in the game. Barstow bought a schooner, called the Water Witch, an' established her as a trader along the coast. The tradin' part was only a blind, hows'ever. Once in about so often we would stop off Nuevo Madrid an' take in what gold Barstow wanted tew send off, all movements being regulated by signals between the schooner an' a cliff on the shore. It was Barstow's fancy tew call our gang the Black League, in memory o' a smug-glin' concern he knowed suthin' about on the Atlantic coast; an' all went on well till a while ago when ill luck begun. The schooner went on the shore in a gale an' all hands was lost, an' now here lies ther last o' the crew, wounded tew death. That air is the story o' the Black League, an' o' Barstow's steal from Don Ramon."

"Canto one is proved," said the alcalde, "an' the American eagle is floppin' its wings like cymbals. We mean ter prove all we say an' more, too. Call up the second brigade an' let Marcy speak."

The man who had seen Ernest Baldwin die advanced and told the same story related by Long-Haired Max to Barstow, at the beginning of our story, and then Tim Foley told how Buck Eagan died.

"I can tell something of this conspiracy affair, myself," said Major Eaton. "It is scarcely more than a myth. Eduardo Castro an' a few hot-headed youth of his age did talk treason and form bloodthirsty plots. What did they amount to? Nothing; for the most bitter of the Mexican residents would not think of following such leaders."

"Barstow, however, heard of the talk and laid a plan to make the matter result to his good. He aspired to win Donna Inez for his wife and resolved to draw her father into a trap where he would be at his mercy. He sent news to San Francisco that a great plot was in progress. Two-score soldiers were sent here under a man not fit to command a beggar in a jacale. As soon as he arrived, Barstow pounced upon him, the weak mind yielded to the strong one, and when Barstow said, 'I am an ex-colonel; I have great influence; I will make you a major if you obey my orders,' Mellough yielded and became his tool. All the papers used in the case were forged by Barstow. Eduardo Castro has made a full confession; perhaps Mellough will do the same."

Eaton looked at the lieutenant, and the miserable little wretch fell on his knees and begged for mercy, confessing his entire complicity.

Up to this time Barstow had maintained his composure, but such rank treachery was too much for his nerves and he suddenly drew a revolver. A bullet would speedily have ended Mellough's career, but Long-Haired Max had been watching the colonel and he promptly flung himself upon him.

The baffled villain was soon overpowered and bound.

"Ther chariot o' justice rolls on," said Alcalde Jones, placidly. "Law an' order are this hyar proximo established in this jewrisprudence an' ther American eagle— But you have a story ter tell, Mr. Long-Haired Max."

"It is that of the Baldwin family," said Max, gravely; "of a restless, roving, almost doomed family. I could take you back two centuries to

tell of strange events and unhappy fates, but it is unnecessary. My father, Ernest Baldwin, lived at the East, and became a parent of two children, myself, and my sister, Edna, who was six years my senior."

"When I was ten years of age, the roving nature of the family attacked my father and he left his home, from which time he became as one dead to his family, for not once did we hear from him. Three years passed and my mother was deep in sorrow. Boy of thirteen that I was, I had courage and I resolved to find my father. Alas! my judgment was not equal to my courage; I ran away and sent back no word; and my mother soon had to mourn for another lost one."

"You have heard how James Barstow robbed and murdered Ernest Baldwin, at Galveston. Well, after the crime, some strange thing impelled the assassin to seek the home of his victim. He went. He found my mother dead, but, seeing my sister, Edna, fell desperately in love with her. He proposed and was rejected, but he swore revenge."

"At this time, a man of the town fell from a cliff and was killed by the fall. Barstow forged papers, letters and the like—he is an adept at forgery, as you have already seen—and carried them to my sister. Said he, 'These letters will show that you had a motive to kill Tom Wilson. Promise to marry me or I will deliver you to the law as a murderess!'"

"The threat did not subdue her, but she was terrified and took to flight, and for years she has lived a life of fear under a false name."

"Barstow, in the meanwhile, prospered on his stolen money, and finally became the owner of the ranch beyond this; but even then he could not walk the path of honesty. He organized the Black League, created the ghosts of the mission, and robbed Don Ramon methodically."

"Meanwhile, what of myself? When I went out, a mere boy, to battle the world, I had many hard knocks, but though I did not find my father, I managed to keep my head above the tide. Tired of roving, I at last returned to my old home, but my mother was dead, and no one knew where my sister had gone."

"Again I became a wanderer, and it was not until a few weeks ago that I encountered Marcy, and learned my father's fate. Then I came to Nuevo Madrid to seek for vengeance."

"About the same time my sister came here, also, and, as Miss Lingard, entered the house of Don Ramon. When she saw me she at once recognized me, but as I had not seen her since I was a boy of thirteen, I did not suspect that my once rosy-cheeked sister was the same as the pale-faced governess of Casa Victoria."

"I need say no more except to state that James Barstow is hunted down. To-night sees his discomfiture, and all will rejoice; the man who murdered Ernest Baldwin and stole his widow's gold, who lied about and tortured Edna Baldwin, who was heartlessly cruel to his legal wife, the sister of Miss Arnold, here, who has been guilty of more crimes than I can recall—his race is run!"

"Don't bet too heavy on that, young fellow," said the colonel, with a sneer. "I'm a hard man to keep down, and I may rise again."

"You're durnation right you will," said Alcalde Jones. "You'll go up twenty feet sure, an' ther rope will be a strong one. I reckon ther air o' my jewrisprudence will be purer arter ther proximo that sees you done with breathin', an' I wonder I ever slept o' nights with sech a malarious epidemic round me. It seems like a phantasmoria o' a dream when I think on it—as though I had be'n hotnobbin' with Metamorphosis, same as Faust did."

"It's all over now, alcalde," said Max, smiling.

"Right you be, my boves, an' it's high time, I declar'. Durnation wildcats! when I think on't I wonder that a stream of burnin' lava didn't come ter destroy ther town, as it did Sodom and Herculaneus in ther old Bible times. Sech goin's on ain't been seed afore sence I sot in an officious capacity in the boodwah o' justice."

Major Eaton gave the worthy alcalde time to free his mind, and then set about arranging things for the night. Some men must go to jail, others to a hospital, and still others on more pleasant errands, but in Casa Victoria all was joy.

Don Ramon and his daughter were saved, for which they gave due thanks to Long-Haired Max, and as the don whispered words of sympathy to Edna Baldwin (we will no longer call her Miss Lingard), it was plain to see that he was not forgetful of the governess.

Our story is told; we need but take a glance at the future of our characters.

Colonel Barstow was tried, sentenced and hanged; Mellough was dismissed from the army in disgrace; Eduardo Castro, once at liberty, promptly fled to Mexico; while Captain Peters, after a week's illness, died, muttering of the Water Witch.

From that time the Black League ceased to exist, as did the ghosts of the mission, but the supply of gold on which the League had fed abruptly ceased.

Miss Arnold disappeared from Nuevo Madrid.

Don Ramon carried out his plans for Donna Inez—she enjoyed a season as the belle of Washington; but the reader may be surprised to learn that before her departure from California, her father married Edna Baldwin and they went along as her protectors.

So, too, did Max accompany the party, and rumor says that for love for him, Donna Inez refused several very eligible offers; and the statement received color when, at the end of the season, she became Mrs. Max Baldwin.

Immediately after, the party returned to the Pacific coast, but it was not the last they saw of the national capital. The people of California saw fit to send Max to Congress as their representative in after years, and proud, but noble and tender Don Ramon saw his wildest dreams for his daughter's future fulfilled. Six winters of public service satisfied Baldwin, and he returned to the Pacific to enter upon a life of peace and happiness.

He had been given all of Barstow's property, and he and Don Ramon made their ranches almost as one. All are happy, and here we leave him who has been in his time a Senator, a ranch-owner, a rover and "the long-haired avenger."

Tim Foley is still his servant—an honored one—and, as much liberty is given him, he frequently goes down to the village (which is no longer called Nuevo Madrid) to drink a mug of some sort of compound with a gray-haired man who is a portable historian of the vicinity.

To an inquiring stranger he will say:

"Durnation wildcats! don't go any furdur fur information. I know ther hist'ry o' ther town from Alfred ter Omega. I war ther first alcalde an' mayor o' ther jewrisprudence, an' I'll leave it ter Tim ef I didn't set in ther boodwah o' jestice with decorum an' dignity. Romulus founded Paris, an' I giveth a thunderin' big lift on this hyar municipality. Fur any information as ter my ingredients, you kin go ter Senator Baldwin. Me an' him was pards arter ther Damon an' Peter fashion, in ther days when he wore his ha'r long, an' knocked ther back teeth out o' ther Black League!"

THE END.

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- 233 **The Old Boy of Tombstone; or, Wagering a Life on a Card.** By J. E. Badger.
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